(Heels, Rhymes & Nursery Crimes 3) D.D. Lorenzo -

D.D. Lorenzo

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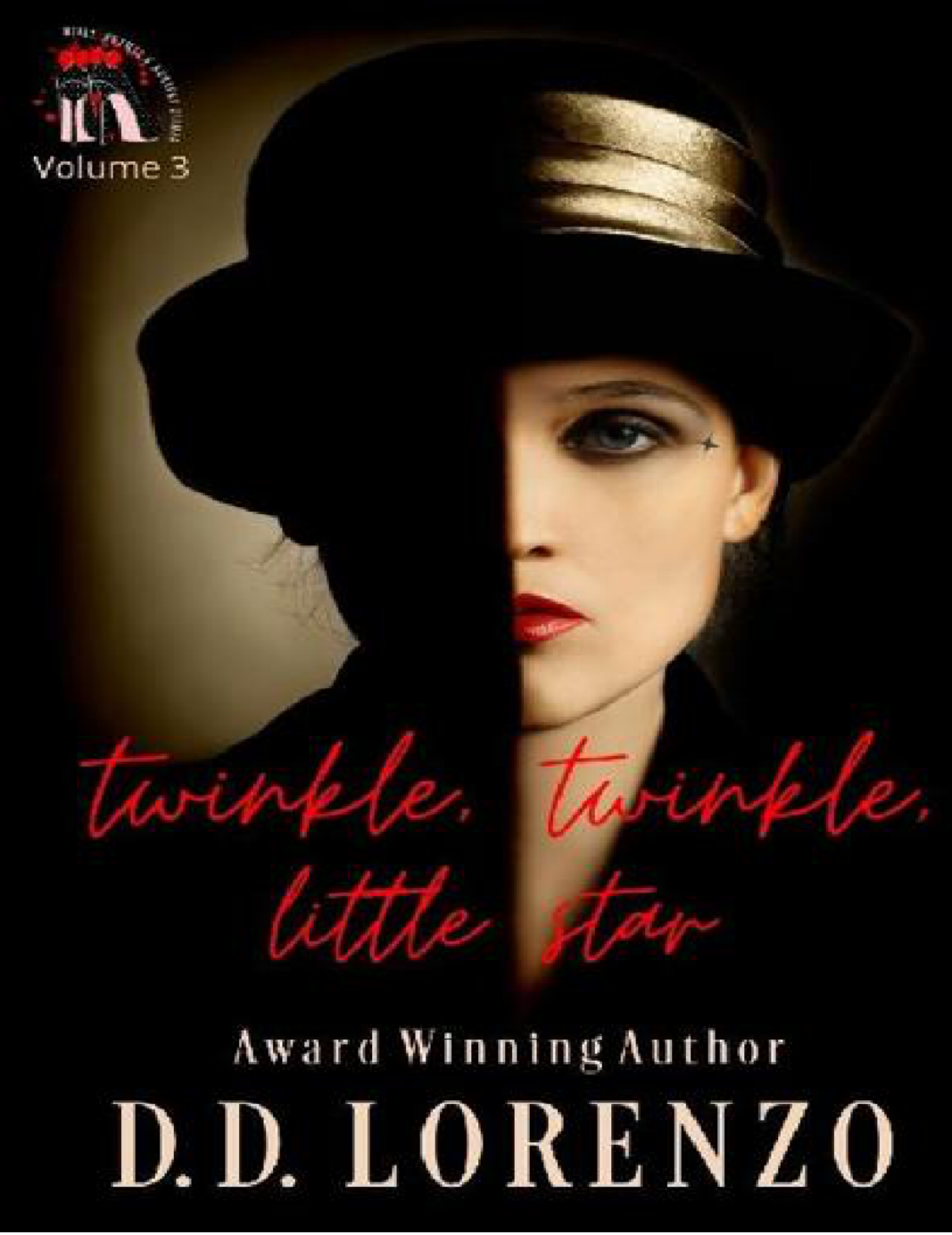
Volume 3



twinkle, twinkle, little star

Award Winning Author

D. D. LORENZO

Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star

(Heels, Rhymes & Nursery Crimes)

D.D. Lorenzo

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by

D.D. Lorenzo

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For my readers

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A Femme Fatale Short

TWINKLE, TWINKLE, LITTLE STAR

BY

D.D. LORENZO

Chapter 1

Rational thought escaped me as the handsome man approached. I'd spied him across the room mere moments before. He took my breath away. The cut of his suit flattered his body in all the best ways. His jacket sat square on his shoulders, accentuating the luxurious cut of the rich material. My eyes traveled down his back where my gaze lingered a bit too long on his backside. Instantly, I chastised myself. My lack of etiquette and lust-filled thoughts would disappoint my mother. No respectable woman should stare at a man's derriere while surrounded by a room full of people, but this man's physique commanded attention and robbed me of my manners.

He turned, and I snapped my eyes to a higher plane to avoid detection but failed in my attempt to appear nonchalant. His eyes met mine. As heat filled my cheeks, a smile snaked onto his lips, and filled his expression with amusement.

Previously, the Oaks hadn't welcomed the fairer sex, so it surprised me women were invited. It was a club built for the business owners in my hometown of Norrisville. This, however, was a special occasion.

Mr. Bailey, the longtime owner of the local haberdashery, had decided to enjoy his later years with travel. Norrisville's wealthiest and most powerful man, Mr. Basil T. Norris, sponsored the celebration in his honor. The entire town had received an invitation. Of course, that also included the women business owners of Main Street. I fit both categories. I'd lived my entire life there. When my mother passed away, I inherited her flower shop, Belle Fleur. My mother said that flowers were evidence of the good Lord's pleasure, and that they could bring joy to even the most cantankerous curmudgeon. My father died in World War I, leaving her to care for me alone. I couldn't remember a day of my life when I wasn't watching her work. She had a talent for creating beautiful things with nearly everything she touched. I was taught the craft while simultaneously learning the books. Thankfully, my mother had insisted I study the ledgers as well, or I would have been ill-prepared to take over Belle Fleur when she died unexpectedly one year before. Pneumonia snatched her from me long before I was ready to let her go.

I'd spent my days since then filling orders, while at night I perused the accounts. This was the first time I'd accepted a social invitation since taking over the business. Now, I struggled to breathe as Oliver Randolph Bennett III, the owner of the town newspaper and the object of my indecent voyeurism, headed toward me.

"Mavis." As he acknowledged me, the sound of my name falling from Oliver's lips made me think of smooth bourbon. "I was under the impression you didn't like social gatherings."

I smiled as I cleared my throat. "Although the flower shop keeps me busy, I do, occasionally, manage to escape."

"You know what they say about all work and no play, Mavis?" He emphasized his playful tone with a drop-dead smile and an arched brow.

Any respectable woman would have kept her distance, but my traitorous body responded without my consent. My heart squeezed and skipped a beat, further making me question my respectability.

"I do," I nodded. "I also know that success isn't possible without hard work. My mother was my example, and a fine one at that. I aspire to be like her."

I couldn't help but notice Oliver's eyes. They were a most beautiful hazel color. The swirled combination of brown and green enthralled me. He too seemed captured by the moment, caught off guard by our connection. I felt uneasy staring but couldn't look away. It must have been as unsettling for him as it was for me. He broke the spell, clearing his throat as he looked at my hand.

"Forgive my manners," he apologized. "May I offer you something to drink?"

I followed his gaze to the punch bowl at the refreshment area, nodding silently as I accepted his offer, I had no choice. His presence had ensnared me. My feet were rooted to the floor, but my eyes followed him about the room, I was unable to tear my gaze away as he went about his task.

Though I'd never given thought to Oliver's notice of me, I was pleased with his familiar approach. He was most handsome and had engaged me as if we were old friends. He was correct in his assumption that I didn't often socialize, so when the invitation to the retirement party had arrived, I'd quickly responded. I wanted to see what secret treasures lurked within its walls. The building was reputed to be the most lavish construction within one hundred miles, and what went on inside was never discussed. Women were not welcome, most assuredly because of the male dominated society of the times. The town patriarch, Mr. Basil Norris, was a man who believed a woman should know her place. He remained unmarried and extremely proud that, at the age of seventy, he was still a bachelor. Though he was

pleasant enough to me when we passed on the street, I was well aware of his misogyny. The only reason my owning a business was tolerated was that the field was considered appropriate for women. Belle Fleur and Miss Jensen's beauty salon, Curly Cute, were the exceptions in the business district. Of course, they would be. It was completely inappropriate for men to arrange flowers and hair.

Although Miss Jensen was older than me, at forty-eight years, we were both regarded as "old maids." I was considered a spinster at the age of twenty-five. Because our stores were women-owned, their relevance was overlooked. Clearly, as far as matters of business and Main Street were concerned, all we had was each other. She said it was that way for her and my mother, and now it was that way for her and I.

Because of her relationship with my mother, and our collective experiences, we formed a bond when I took over the flower shop. We'd been friends ever since. When we received our invitations to this evening's event, we toasted each other with an accomplished *"cheers!"* over a quiet cup of tea.

As we got to know each other better Miss Jensen confided in me that, when The Oaks held the first Norrisville Businessmen's Association meeting, she showed up at the door. My mother didn't accompany her that evening because she was helping me with my lessons. She told me she was glad for my mother's absence that night because when she arrived, she was refused admittance. She was happy my mother was spared her humiliation because she was so kind and tender-hearted—and that enough outrage burned inside of her for them both.

As I'd listened to her story, I learned that she'd stood her ground that night, demanding the reason the doorkeeper wouldn't let her in. "Women aren't allowed," he'd said. That still hadn't stopped her. She insisted on entering, saying she was the owner of a thriving shop, therefore, she should be able to partake in the camaraderie and conversations of her peers. She received an apology, but no admittance. The man wouldn't budge. *No women allowed.*

As I waited for Oliver to return, I watched Miss Jensen charm most of the men in the room. Staunchly independent, she was the type of woman I aspired to be: proud, beautiful, and ladylike. She knew exactly when to assert herself or bat her eyes. I was happy to be her friend, and the memory of her reaction to that incident sparked a streak of independence in me.

THE BLATANT BIGOTRY stiffened my spine. How dare they? I smiled as I watched Miss Jensen on the dance floor with Mr. Fitzgerald. Her posture perfect. Her every step graceful. I couldn't believe she was the

same woman who'd relayed her story to me. She confided to me that, inside, she'd turned into a viper ready to strike. She overheard Mr. Norris thanking the men for sending that "silly little woman" away. "Who does she think she is?" and "That woman is too full of herself," he'd commented. All I could think as I looked at Alvinia, and then at Mr. Norris, was that they were both forces to be reckoned with—even if he couldn't see it.

"Hello, doll." Alvinia approached. She leaned over and whispered in my ear, "He is handsome, isn't he?"

I answered with a roll of my eyes.

"You know he is. Go for it!"

Oliver approached, and she stood upright. A pleasing tilt of her chin and a smile greeted him. "Good to see you, Mr. Bennett."

"My pleasure, Miss Jensen."

Alvinia looked between us, a twinkling curiosity in her eye. Her ruby-red lips curled in a smirk. "Okay, then. I think I'll leave you to it." She looked toward the dance floor. "I think I have another dance or two in me, so I'm going to skedaddle." She raised a hand and wiggled her fingers. "Toodles!"

I watched as she pranced away. I'd learned a lot by watching Alvinia Jensen, but the most important thing she taught me was that she didn't value her worth by the standards of men, and neither should I.

Chapter 2

"Here you go." Oliver handed me a crystal glass filled nearly to the brim. "A word of caution: sip slowly. There's a lot of champagne in the punch."

"Thanks. I appreciate the warning." I tipped my glass toward him before placing it to my lips. *There can't be that much alcohol in this.* I barely detected the scent of anything other than a fruity fragrance. I swallowed and the liquid went down easily. I concluded that the drink was harmless, and Oliver was being overly cautious.

"Excuse me a moment. I see Mr. Tenney over there." He placed himself in front of me, capturing my attention as I lowered the glass. I once again was hooked by the hazel pools. His lips parted as his words playfully tickled my ears. "I hope you'll still be here when I get back."

My perfectly arched brow perked up and I responded in the same playful tone. "I might be."

He laughed, then made his way over to his associate. I leaned back against the wall. The architecture and décor of the room surpassed anything I could dream up. The walls screamed money with their rich wood and millwork, but the furnishings were soft yet masculine. Rich leather sofas were scattered about the room with wooden tables nearby for holding drinks and ashtrays. I took in the beauty. Crystal chandeliers with hundreds of cut-glass pieces sparkled, reflecting interesting prisms and shadows along the walls and ceiling. Each teardrop shape dangled while capturing rays of light. I admired the expert craftsmanship. Whoever conceived of the marriages of wood, glass, and marble possessed a wonderful talent for design. My mother loved fine things and passed that trait along to me. It didn't matter if we ever possessed them.

As I waited for Oliver to return, I helped myself to another drink, and when that one was done, I had another. I was about to have a fourth when I grew uncomfortable.

The room felt stifling. My skin prickled with heat. The temperature caused by too many bodies made me feel like there was no oxygen in the room. I gulped the rest of my punch, suddenly feeling panicky. I set the cup down with a thud and quickly looked for the nearest exit.

When I found it, I pushed my way through the crowd so I could quickly access the door and get some air. I had just about reached it when I suddenly felt breathless and faint. I crashed into Oliver's chest.

* * *

"OH, NO!" I bumped the glass he was holding, the contents of which splashed over both of us. My dress and his lapel bore the brunt of my faux pas. I raised my hand to his coat, but he blocked my arm as he reached inside his jacket and pulled a handkerchief from a hidden pocket.

"I'm so sorry, Oliver."

He said nothing as I watched, embarrassed, while he dabbed at the material. A few of those surrounding us caught the motion. When he was finished with his task he reached to do the same to me. I jumped back in horror, shriveling beneath the observations of the nosey but watchful eyes. No matter the honorable intent, a man's hand on my breast was completely unacceptable. A few in the small group noted his mistake, their eyes going wide, but Oliver quickly recovered after realizing what he'd nearly done. Instantly he flipped his wrist, his palm facing up as he offered me the cloth.

"Thank you." Quickly I wiped away the spill. The dark fabric absorbed the spot without a noticeable stain, but it was wet and uncomfortable. The saturated material clung to my skin. I handed the handkerchief back to Oliver. "I'm afraid I've made a mess. Allow me to excuse myself so that I may properly clean up. Thank you again for your help."

Struggling with being the center of attention, even for a moment, I offered a fake smile. I was mortified that I'd been so clumsy, guarding closely the fact I was tipsy. It only took a moment for the busybodies to dismiss us. I took the opportunity to make my exit.

I stopped at the coat check for my wrap and hat. Once they were, respectively, around my shoulders and on my head, I stepped out into the night. There was a slight chill to the air in the darkness. The cool temperature accentuated the dampness against my skin. I shivered. Goose pimples raised my flesh and pebbled my nipples. Because of the cut of the dress, I wore nothing between my breasts and the garment, and now the hardened tips rubbed against the material. I readjusted the wrap, pulling it and my arms tighter around me for warmth. Thankfully, I didn't have far to go until I reached home.

"Mavis! Wait up!"

I stopped, turning in the direction of Oliver's call. The quick motion made me woozy, emphasizing that that final glass of champagne laced punch might not have been my best decision of the

night. Though I wasn't sure why he'd followed me, it only took a quick paced jaunt for Oliver to be at my side. My puzzled expression sent him an unspoken question and he answered as if I'd said the words aloud.

"What kind of man would I be if I allowed you to walk home unescorted?" His eyes caught mine, and for the second time this evening, I found myself falling into their warmth. The silver flecks hidden in the center caught the moonlight, casting a spell on my heart. He offered his arm. When I hesitated, he took my hand and placed it on the crook. He pressed my fingers closed with his own, and again I shivered.

Though fabric was between us I felt the solid muscle hidden beneath. My body responded, confusing me with the effects of alcoholic spirits and desire. My legs became noodles, forcing me to lean into Oliver for support. He smiled, closing his hand over mine and holding tight.

"I fear the refreshments have gone to my head. I've not been out in a while and indulged a little more than I should have." My comment earned me a look of surprise.

"A little more?"

"Yes. A pinch." I emphasized the point by gesturing with my thumb and index finger.

"Hmm." He paused for the thought. "Then I suppose we must get you out more to build up your tolerance. We can't have you tripping every time you drink champagne."

A small giggle escaped me, earning a wink and a smile from a man whose presence, at the moment, caused my body to react on its own—and I liked it.

"Now, that's what I like to hear, the sound of laughter." His voice dropped lower. "Yours is delightful."

My blood rushed with heat. His words and tone were deep, dark, and exciting, and caused a clenching sensation of my most intimate parts.

"Why, Mavis, are you blushing?"

I'd hoped the fire running through my veins wouldn't be detectable on the outside of my skin, but no luck. Oliver stared, studying my reactions. If I were in the privacy of my room, I would have rubbed my legs together to ease the ache between them. Since I was unable to do so I suffered the denial with wet panties and an incessant throb.

"Mavis."

The deep, rumbling sound of my name as it fell from his lips made my heart boom. I could think of nothing else but him and what it would be like to be satisfied with his body, and not in the secrecy of my room by my own hand. He stopped walking, and I followed suit.

Our eyes locked. My body betrayed me. Though I barely knew him, my sex prepared to receive him inside of me. I fell beneath the lusty spell. Torrid images of Oliver and me swam through my mind. They were wicked, and they were wanted.

Chapter 3

"We're here."

Momentarily stunned, I froze. "What?"

"We're here," he repeated. A deep chuckle came from low in his chest as he tipped his head. I followed the invisible line connecting his eyes to what he wanted me to see and found that we were standing in front of Belle Fleur.

"It didn't seem that we walked so far." Embarrassment made me sound timid and breathless. I released his arm and took a step back, needing distance to regain my composure. His face was entirely too beautiful for a man. It was no wonder women fell at his feet. Though my body screamed for him to touch me, logic told me to say goodnight. But it was a losing battle. The air between us was charged with sexual tension, and as I looked into his eyes, I could see that the spell consuming me had the same effect on him. His gaze was daunting with its power. Instinctively I looked away, lowering my eyes toward the ground but evidence of his lust pressed hard against his slacks.

Desire clenched my core. I brushed the back of his hand with the tips of my fingers "Would you like to come in?"

As I waited for his answer, parts of my body awakened. I wanted him to touch me the way I touched myself in secret. I didn't know what to do or what to say.

I didn't have to wonder long. Oliver took the choice from me. He lifted my chin and looked deep into my eyes. The heat in his gaze, like a predator upon prey, consumed me and I felt myself wanting unspeakable things. Suddenly, I felt like Red Riding Hood beneath the glare of the wolf—and there was no mistake, Oliver was just such a beast.

I trembled. His reputation with women was whispered behind his back. Tales of his prowess and the pleasures he delivered were fodder for the gossip crowd. I'd heard the stories, but never discussed them. Instead, I tucked them away, and when I lay in the dark with urges of my own, they were the foundation of carnal images. I'd brought myself to pleasure many times while thinking of him. And why

wouldn't I? Not only was Oliver Randolph Bennett III the most eligible bachelor in all of Norrisville, but—*what am I doing?*

An anxiety driven rush of fear suddenly cut me and a cold shot of reality sent ice down my spine. I attempted to clear my mind, but with Oliver so near it was a fruitless pursuit as thoughts of having him naked against me swirled around in my champagne muddled brain. The thought of him filling and pleasuring me caught my breath. If I were to escape the demands of my flesh, now would be the time. I should go inside and get some sleep. That would be the sensible thing to do.

Opening my mouth to rescind my invitation, I parted my lips to speak. I didn't get the chance to utter a word, rendered speechless when Oliver hooked his thumb inside my mouth. The pure sensuality of the act caught me off guard. He tugged, the digit pressing against the inside of my bottom teeth, pulling and closing the distance between us. He lowered his hand to my shoulder and our lips touched. His hot breath teased me as it skimmed my mouth.

"You should be afraid, beautiful girl. *Very* afraid."

* * *

WHEN THE DOOR OPENED, we were sweetly assaulted with fragrances that over time had permeated the walls. Remnants of lavender and lilac swept up through the wooden floor and danced in the air, while a faint hint of roses trailed not far behind. It had been several years since Belle Fleur's grand opening, and the room in which we stood had cradled the blossoms of earth's innocence.

Fresh, beautiful flowers were not merely used for decoration. They expressed sentiment, adding to their purpose. Life's most notable events were full of celebrations and sorrows. Promises of love, new life, and painful goodbyes. I loved this room and the comfort I always felt while in it, but Oliver's presence here with me was adding a new dimension of feelings as we stood in the dark.

I took a few steps back, and let my wrap fall to the floor.

"I can offer you tea, or perhaps you'd like a whiskey." My husky tone made my words sound thick and was one with which I wasn't familiar.

His lip curled with mischief. "Why, Mavis, you little minx. Aren't you full of surprises?" His voice dripped with honey-like sexuality. "What would the Reverend Mr. Crawford say?"

"I don't know," I shrugged innocently. "I suppose, thank you?"

A hearty laugh burst from his chest, and I reveled in the sound. The timbre of Oliver's deep, rich rumble was charismatic and confident. It invited me to play.

He slipped his arm around my waist and kissed me. I lost myself as our tongues tangled. My eyes were closed as he walked me through the dark. I felt the tapestry curtains brush over my arms as Oliver guided my backward steps to the room in the rear of the shop. It was a private area. A combination kitchen and place to prepare the flowers. After tonight, it would hold memories other than a hint of gossip, a cup of tea, or a vase of whatever blooms were in season.

We were caught up in the moment. Teacher to student. With one finger Oliver traced my arms and every nerve ending stood upright and demanded attention. His touch was the match to my flame as he stroked me and sparked my desires. I wanted him to consume me. To burn away what was left of the naïve girl and give her womanly pleasures.

He spun me around, kissed the tender hollow behind my earlobe, and slowly traced a trail down my neck with his tongue. His arm came up across my back as he bent me over the island where we stripped leaves from stems. His lips kissed and teased until he reached the gentle curve where my neck met my shoulder. His teeth sank into the tender flesh there, and I gasped as he simultaneously kicked my legs apart with his shoe. They only separated as far as my dress would allow. The noise that he made sounded like a growl, and he clutched the garment with his fist. He teased me by pulling the material ever so slowly, and as it rose higher and higher the sequins scratched my sensitive skin. It slid up the back of my legs and hips until it bared my backside, my skin rippling with goosebumps of pleasure. The cooler air kissed my heated sex, and a fresh rush of wetness came unbidden.

“Your skin is like silk. I like that.” His voice, thick with desire, accelerated the ratcheting beat of my heart.

Eager fingers mapped a trail up the back of my thighs and over my curves. His breathing increased hot and heavy, and I jumped as I felt his hard member breach the seam separating my plump cheeks. I wondered when he’d freed himself. My hips dug into the edge of the table as he pinned me, but somehow, I found pleasure in the pain.

I moaned, and an animalistic sound escaped him. It made me shiver, knowing he would soon take me. I should have been terrified, but I was a slave to my lust. I craved *la petite mort*—the little death that poets described and his body promised. I could barely breathe, and what oxygen I did inhale entered my lungs through ragged breaths.

My sex clenched, producing a painful ache. Oliver pressed the tip of his erection against my opening and a momentary flash of pleasure forced my eyes closed. I didn’t have long to ponder the thought when he came at me from the front with his fingers and slipped them inside of me. My knees went weak as the muscle fisted, capturing his fingers

in its grip.

"Jesus, you're tight."

"I . . . I . . ."

"Just relax." He slowed his actions. "Relax, and I promise I'll make it feel good for you."

Oliver kissed my shoulder as he slowly pumped his fingers in and out of me. Pleasure built as he moved. A ball of energy was growing inside of me, and it kept building until I felt like I'd burst into flame. I sucked in a sharp breath as, without warning, he removed his fingers and pinched the bundle of nerves between my tender lips, distracting me as he plunged inside me with a mighty thrust. After that, I lost myself in sensations of pain and pleasure, losing touch with reality as Oliver made the world around me fall away.

Chapter 4

A million racing thoughts zipped through my mind. They ranged in clarity bouncing back-and-forth between the good and bad sides of my brain. One second a booming voice inside my head said, *Damn! That felt good!* and the next it whispered, *Oh my god! What have you done!*

"Mavis, you are full of surprises." Oliver's rumbling baritone cut through the jumbled mess as he backed away from me. My dress slid down over my rear end, falling back into place like the final curtain after a three-act play, while the remnants of Oliver's orgasm coated the inside of my thighs. I pushed myself upright. In that moment I should have been ashamed. My skin should be flushed crimson by the embarrassing display. Instead, all I felt was relaxed. The tension that had been building since my mother's death was gone. The stress of taking over the business left my body along with my cries of ecstasy. I turned. Oliver was over at the sink, washing his hands. He barely looked like he'd gained a wrinkle in his clothes, while my stockings bagged at the knees. When he turned, I saw he wore a wicked smile.

Bold and brazen, I approached him and was mere inches away when he startled me by grabbing my wrist. He pulled me to him with such force that I nearly toppled over. He steadied me, holding me easily in his arms. His eyes bored into me. It was mere seconds before his lips crashed down on mine.

Passion and lust were a potent cocktail, and instantly, I fell under their spell. My arms went around his waist. I lost myself in his kiss. Oliver held me as if he were a drowning man and I was his only source of air, and then, abruptly, he broke our connection.

"I have to go." His voice was ragged.

A flicker of indignance flashed inside me. Had I just become a one-night stand?

"Why?" My body reacted, and my spine stiffened. I pushed away from him, my heart bruised by the hint of rejection. I could tell by his expression that he saw the fury in my eyes.

"Because if I don't go now, I'll have you again."

His declaration did nothing to abate my anger, and at the moment,

I wasn't certain if the building rage was more with him or with myself. He owed me no allegiance, and I owed him no explanation. Oliver was a womanizer. I knew that when I allowed him to mount me from behind.

If I were truthful with myself I'd admit that he hadn't used me. I was a willing accomplice to our passionate crime. Though the smoking gun was back inside of his trousers, I felt the wound of indignation. Regardless of my feelings, I refused to feign modesty like some lovesick girl. I was well aware of what I'd done and the decisions I'd made. I was too strong for weak emotions. We'd both wanted the same thing when we crossed through the threshold. This was no time for tender feelings.

"Don't let me keep you." There was a sharp edge in my tone. I stepped aside, motioning with a wave of my hand the pathway toward the door. His eyes widened.

"Mavis, you're a lovely girl. I—" He took a half step toward me, his arms slightly open. Welcoming.

"Oliver, stop." I interrupted. "I'd like you to go." There was no need for more hollow words to pacify me.

"Aren't you going to let me ex—"

"No. Please go. Now."

He gave me a hard look. Apparently, he wasn't used to a woman dismissing him. When he saw that there was no chance I'd entertain false words of admiration, he gave his shoulders a shake and headed toward the door.

I followed his weighted steps through the curtain separating the store from the private area and locked my eyes on him until he reached his destination. Without looking back, he grabbed the handle, flinging the door open wide enough for him to escape into the night. It slammed behind him, and I flinched. The jingle bells clanged as the door latched.

Once he was gone, I flipped the lock and went back into the kitchen. I flopped into one of the two chairs that sat at a tiny table where my mother and I used to have tea each day. *Would she be ashamed of me?*

I formed a circle on the table with my arms and dropped my head. Exhaustion sapped the remainder of my energy. My eyes burned with tears, but not over a man. Though I regretted nothing, I hoped that my indiscretion wouldn't be the newest topic for the gossip mill.

I jolted upright at the mental slap. Oliver owned the town newspaper. How did I know that it wasn't he that dropped hints and planted stories that would keep him and his conquests at the forefront of the town's latest gossip? *He wouldn't! Would he?*

He wouldn't dare.

Aggravation scratched my thoughts with sharp claws. So, what if he talked? It was his word against mine. There might be some who would snigger, but my good reputation was well ingrained in our small community. The townspeople had cared for me since I was a child. Most still called me “Twinkle,” a nickname they’d given me for the star shaped beauty mark at the corner of my eye. There was an equal amount of affection on my part for them. I’d grown up here, whereas Oliver had waltzed into town six years ago when he bought the flailing little rag of a newspaper for pennies on the dollar.

At first, he was welcomed with open arms, but when he started reporting on stories that the locals would rather keep quiet, their affection for him cooled. True, the police passed tidbits such as a whiskey still discovery or a man who got a frying pan to his head after beating his wife, but Oliver had a way of sensationalizing them so that Norrisville’s residents hung on every word.

Instantly, I was vexed at the possibility that Oliver might be less than gentlemanly and share his exploits with a friend. Norrisville was a small town. It was imperative for me to come up with a story of my own. I preferred to be proactive and prepare something to counter anything that Oliver might say, and, of course, I would bend the truth in my favor.

Chapter 5

Several weeks had come and gone since that night with Oliver. Although I still felt an attraction to him, I didn't expect that he felt the same. I busied myself with my work, extending my hours by one a day. I felt accomplished. My business was doing well, so well, in fact that in the weeks since that night with Oliver, I'd added a person to my payroll. Sweet Mr. Lester.

Mr. Lester was an older gentleman I'd known forever. He'd lost his job at the mill after an accident that left him with a permanent limp. Although the mill owner, Mr. Cook, had given him an undisclosed compensatory sum, the older man was bored. He wanted to be busy and desired work. It had taken him six months to heal.

His loving wife, Mrs. Lester, doted on him. Never once when I inquired about his health and how he was healing did she complain. I'd run into her twice, once at the butcher's shop and the other at the bakery. The first time I'd asked she told me he was healing well. The second time I inquired she said he'd recovered and was constantly underfoot, driving her a bit crazy. There wasn't a malicious tone in her voice, but her response was accompanied by a roll of her eyes and a chuckle. I knew she'd be happy if Mr. Lester would be so kind as to invest himself in a hobby instead of the goings on in her kitchen.

Evidence of his meddling came my way when he stopped in one day, asking what an appropriate flower for an angry wife would be. He'd complained that he didn't have anything to do and suggested to Mrs. Lester that she might want to add some more herbs and potatoes to her soup. The picture he painted gave me a chuckle. I made him a posy of colorful blooms that would be sure to charm his wife with their sweet smelling fragrance. Once he'd paid for them, he slowly walked toward the door, favoring his injured leg.

"I sure wish I had something else to do 'cides gettin' on the missus's nerves," he'd muttered.

"Then why don't you work for me?" The words had escaped before I had a moment to think. But the truth was, I'd needed the help, and as long as Mr. Lester could sit at a table and strip stems for me, I had a job for him.

“Are ya serious, Miss Mavis?” There’d been no mistaking the hopeful look in his eye. His tone held a plea. I nodded.

“I am. I’ve been thinking about it for some time. There’s so much prep work before the flowers are arranged. I can teach you how to do it and that will free me up to either take on more work or—God save us—to possibly have a little time to myself.” I paused, then tipped my chin toward him. “Come on, Mr. Lester. What do you think? Would you want to help me out? I know it might not be what you were looking for, but—”

“I’ll take it.” His words came out with a rush as a smile split his face, revealing a row of crooked bottom teeth. I couldn’t remember when I’d seen Mr. Lester smile so wide. It made the corners of his eyes crinkle, and their blue color sparkle.

“Great!” Elated, I clapped my hands together and joined in his excitement. “We start at four-thirty in the morning. You should be finished by two-thirty in the afternoon—and that includes time for cleanup. We deliver every day, but on Mondays we make business deliveries. The store doesn’t open until twelve noon on that day, but that’s been because I have had no one to make the deliveries for me.”

“I’d do that too for ya, if ya let me.”

“I would love that! I need the help, if it wouldn’t be too much for you.”

“Nope. Not too much at all, Miss Mavis. Doc says I need to exercise this here leg so the rheumatism doesn’t set in. Walking is as good an exercise as any. Besides, it’ll get me out in the good Lord’s fresh air, and we all need a little bit of that.”

He winked and slapped his hand on his freshly pressed pants. It was apparent that Mrs. Lester took her husband’s appearance to heart. Mr. Lester always presented a smart look. That would go well when he made deliveries. The creases in his pants looked sharp enough to slice through butter, and his hair was always neatly trimmed and combed back.

I came around the counter and offered him my outstretched hand. “It’s a deal then.”

He gave me a wink and a smile. “My missus’ll be happy to get rid of me.”

“And I’ll be happy to have you.”

“Then I’ll be here bright and early in the mornin’.”

“Great. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He’d tipped two fingers to his forehead then turned toward the door. I would have sworn there was more of a spring in his bad leg when he left than when he’d come in.

I mentally gave myself a pat on the back. It had been a good decision. Mr. Lester had a good reputation as both a person and as a

hard worker. He'd become an asset to the business already.

Old Mrs. Tully hadn't been feeling well and the ladies from her cribbage club wanted an arrangement to cheer her up. Since the ladies served tea at their games, I turned to search the cupboard behind me for a teapot in which to place the flowers. I was on my knees, stretching to reach all the way into the back where I'd seen the porcelain pot when I heard the bell on the door jangle.

"I'll be right with you," I called over my shoulder.

"Take your time. I'm enjoying the view."

The sound of Oliver's voice made me jump, and I bumped my head. "Ow!" I rubbed the spot as I pulled back.

"Are you okay?"

I leaned back on my heels and looked up into the hazel eyes that haunted my dreams.

"Here. Let me help you." Oliver scooted behind the counter, dropping to one knee. "What did you hurt?"

Since I'd last seen Oliver, I realized that he was my weakness. Before he'd noticed me, I fantasized about him. Once I'd had sex with him, I knew what a danger he posed to my peace of mind. I realized how easily I'd fallen under his spell and if I didn't guard myself I would do so again. I quickly trussed my thoughts with imaginary rope, its braid crisscrossing with grit, determination, and pride.

"I'm fine. Thank you." I pushed the cupboard door closed and used the handle to pull myself up. "What can I do for you, Mr. Bennett?"

His brow arched. "Mr. Bennett? My, my, aren't we formal?"

I directed his attention to the display. "If you're here for flowers, this is all that I have left today. If you want something fresh, you'll have to wait until tomorrow."

He studied me. Apparently, he wasn't happy with my statement. Disappointment clouded his eyes. "Have I done something to offend you?"

"Not at all," I lied. *Yes, you cad! You corrupt my thoughts and I hate you for it.*

"I came to ask you if you might like to accompany me to supper sometime."

I feigned a smile. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

He was about to ask a question when the door once again opened. I looked over his shoulder. A young blonde appeared, wearing the most beautiful peach dress. It complimented her light hair. She closed the distance from the front door to the counter with quick steps and coyly tapped Oliver on the arm. Though the movement was slight my traitorous heart suffered the sledgehammer-like impact.

Chapter 6

She reminded me of Scarlett O'Hara in Gone with the Wind in the scene where she makes her entrance at the picnic. Her perky attitude defined playfully coy as she dropped her chin and batted her eyes. I instantly pegged her as devious a character as the movie depicted. The only difference was her clothes for she wore a navy blue satin dress cinched tight at the waist instead of a bell-shaped gown. Her hat was a deep, bloody burgundy color which matched her bag and shoes. She was perfect.

"You naughty boy," the woman cooed. "You disappeared when I was speaking with Mr. Norris. I wondered where you'd disappeared to. Why did you sneak off?" She looked around the shop, then gave him a shy look. "Were you going to surprise me with something pretty?"

Oliver gave her a hard look. "Mavis, this is Genevieve. Genevieve, meet Mavis Travers. She's the owner of this establishment."

Genevieve's eyes darkened. "Hello."

"Hello."

Oliver glanced between us as an awkward silence ensued. After a few moments, the young woman slipped her hand through his arm. "This is such a lovely little shop." Though her words were pleasant, the look she gave me was not. Her eyes narrowed. The hint of condescension carried in her words. She peered up at Oliver, giving him the most adoring look through the thickest, darkest lashes I'd ever seen. She used them well, batting her eyes innocently. "You're such a dear, and flowers were a lovely thought, but I'm not in the mood. May we go now? I'd love to meet Mama for lunch."

Oliver appeared uncomfortable, and I wondered why. Surely Genevieve had him in her sights. Any woman with half a wit could tell that she was playing him, and why not? He was handsome, wealthy, and confident—although, at the moment, he didn't seem pleased. He gave me a pensive look before turning his attention to the woman on his arm.

"Yes. We can go." He tipped his hat brim. "Mavis. It was good to see you."

I said nothing. I was more intent on capturing the mood of the woman he escorted. I could see from the corner of my eye that she didn't like the familiarity of him using my given name.

"It was nice meeting you, Miss Travers." She paused. "It is, *Miss* Travers, is it not?"

"It is—and it was lovely to meet you too, Miss . . ."

"Rothchild. Genevieve Rothchild."

"Rothchild," I repeated. Of course, Oliver would be with a Rothchild. They were the richest family on the East Coast.

I took a few steps over to a black bucket that held what was left of my cream-colored, cabbage roses. I plucked one of the fullest. One that would surely lose its petals within twenty-four hours. Drying the stem with my apron, I turned to Miss Rothchild, and extended the hand holding it. "For you."

She eyed me warily before accepting the gift. "Well, aren't you just the sweetest thing?" Her tone was so sugary that I nearly choked on it. Two could play this game.

"It's nothing, really." I said in an equally, syrupy-thick voice. "You're new in town, aren't you?"

"I am." She answered in a unique, sing-song tone I was quickly growing to hate. She might be a Rothchild, but money could only get a person so far, especially women. She turned her attention to Oliver with a hopeful twinkle in her eye. "I haven't yet decided, but it could be for a longer period than I originally thought."

She then turned her eyes to me. Although she'd kept the smile in place, I detected the tight line in her lips. I was onto her, and she knew it. Feminine wiles, and the manipulative games women played with it, were something of which I was acquainted. After all, my mother had catered to the whims and particularities of the wealthiest women in town, and she'd done so with me in tow. I'd grown up watching the interactions between women, learning which words and phrases stroked their egos—and which tore out their hearts.

Oliver remained silent, watching the exchange. By the look in his eye, it appeared he was well aware of her game, and her catty attitude wasn't lost on him. "Let's leave Mavis to it, shall we? We've taken too much of her time already. I'm sure your mother's looking for you."

"Thank you again, Miss Travers." Genevieve tipped the rose toward me before pulling it to her nose for a whiff. "What a lovely scent," she said, her eyes full of false wonder as she gave me a look. "It's so funny, isn't it—the differences in flowers? Some are so lovely and some . . . well, some are pretty, but they stink." She wrinkled her nose to emphasize the point.

A line etched Oliver's brow but I could tell by his expression he understood the implication of her words. I certainly did.

I straightened my posture and raised my chin proudly. Genevieve had carefully constructed her words to bait me. I prepared to spit an equally cryptic remark, but as I did so my eyes met Oliver's and I saw an unspoken apology.

He turned the young woman beside him toward the door as I bit back my words. I watched every step as Oliver placed distance between me and a woman I instantly hated. When they were about to step outside, he tipped his hat. "Mavis. It was nice seeing you again."

Genevieve's eyes narrowed as she looked between Oliver and me to gauge the depth of our friendship.

"Thank you for coming in." I turned my attention to Genevieve. "It was nice to meet you. Please stop by again."

She nodded as a sarcastic quirk twisted her lips. Then they were gone. I waited until they were out of sight and then every possible question I could entertain about Genevieve Rothchild, and who she was to Oliver, tumbled over me in a free-falling cascade.

What was their relationship?

Did they have an arrangement?

Was theirs one of those relationships that had been hoped for, or agreed to, between their families?

The speculations would do me no good. I looked down at my white-knuckled fists. Yes, Genevieve irritated me. Women like her always did. They were so fake. They also knew how to manipulate men. Most of the poor creatures didn't even suspect that they were toys in a game of cat and mouse. Oliver seemed to be well aware of the ruse but, unlike most men, his vision didn't appear to be obstructed by her beauty.

I followed their path and locked the door and flipped the open sign to closed. It was near enough to lunchtime, and my stomach was doing flip-flops. I'd felt nauseated and had been fighting off the urge to vomit since early morning, and Genevieve's prickly attitude rattled what was left of my nerves.

Escaping the storefront into the back room, I reached into the icebox for the remnants I'd wrapped from last night's dinner. The minute I opened them my stomach began to roll. I placed the cover back over the food, chalking up the sick feeling to overwork as I'd been putting in more hours of late. Although today was the worst I'd felt, in truth I'd been fighting with my insides for days. It seemed that every time I tried to eat, my stomach rebelled. A nagging worry rattled my brain, and, after seeing Oliver and the snotty little tart it shook me like an earthquake.

My courses were two weeks overdue.

I hid my face in my hands. Dread raised the hair on the back of my neck. *I could be . . . No!* I refused to entertain the possibility that I

might be pregnant.

"You okay, Miss Mavis?"

I nodded. Mr. Lester interrupted my thoughts as I tried to summon a smile. He was a blessing both to me and the business. The sweet man and his wife had endeared themselves to me. Mr. and Mrs. Lester seemed to arrive as a set, like a shaker of salt with the pepper. They spiced up my life with their playful banter, but somehow, she seemed to sense the emptiness I had inside over my mother. She invested herself in my everyday life, but not in an overbearing way. She watched over me like a hen with a chick, occasionally sending Mr. Lester to work with a lunch pail filled with enough food for two. He always said the food he brought were leftovers from the previous night's dinner, but I knew better. Chicken or meat pies that a fork never touched showed up with increasing regularity.

Mr. Lester stood behind a chair opposite me. "Can I sit with ya?"

I gave another weak smile in response, the unspoken invitation understood between us. He pulled out the chair.

"The missus outdid herself last night." His face lit up as he opened the metal pail. The scent of minced lamb pie filled the air between us. "Don't this look good?"

I looked at the dish and then swallowed hard. My hand flew to my mouth as the smell flipped my stomach, and I rushed to the back door for some much-needed air.

Chapter 7

I inhaled great gulps of oxygen. It helped to ward off the nausea but hadn't stopped it completely. The smell of Mr. Lester's lunch had set the wave in motion.

I remained out back for a few minutes. There was a slight, frigid bite in the air, and I'd not grabbed a wrap. No matter, I welcomed the chill. It had a sobering effect on my mind and a calming effect on my stomach. Clearing my head of the competing smells of flowers and food I tried to force myself to sort all the *what-if's* that threatened my peace.

Thinking that maybe a good walk would help, I returned to the shop and gingerly closed the door behind me. I moved in slow motion, knowing that my current reprieve of sickness could be upset again at any moment. I lifted my shawl from the hook then slowly placed my hat on my head. Mr. Lester watched in silence.

"I'm going to take a walk. I'll be back in a little while."

"Are ya okay, Miss?"

I nodded.

The older man watched me. I could see the concern in his eyes, but he didn't lend his voice to intrusive questions. I offered no explanation as I exited into the back alley. I was just about to turn the corner onto the side street when I overheard voices—Oliver's and another man.

"I HAVEN'T HAD the opportunity to speak with her," Oliver said.

"Do you have to? Perhaps it might be best to leave it where it is for now."

"I do, Reginald. To not do so would be callous. I'm not a cad. I saw the look in her eye. I wounded her. The last thing I want is to hurt a woman."

"Yes. You'd rather play with them." Both men had a good laugh at that before continuing. "She's far from innocent, Oliver. I fear you may not come out of this unscathed, my friend. Didn't your mother ever teach you that hell has no fury like a woman scorned."

"Yes, as a matter-of-fact she did. I wouldn't say that I'm scorning her. I've made no promises."

“You’ll do what you think is best, old chap, but I think the less you do the better it will be. Heed my warning. Leave it alone.”

“I can’t do that. I need to make it clear to her that there will never be anything more between us than friendship.”

“You’re a brave man, Oliver. Much braver than me.”

The man Oliver addressed as Reginald laughed. I peeked around the red brick corner of the building and caught him slapping Oliver on the shoulder as they walked away.

“Don’t be dismayed, old boy. She’ll get over it,” he consoled. “They always do.”

Although I hadn’t exchanged anything more than a nod of greeting on the street with Oliver since the night we were together, his words stung. I knew they were talking about me, and I felt something inside of me die a thousand deaths.

I had neither expected nor asked anything of him. Although I told myself that Oliver didn’t matter to me and what happened between us was simply the satisfaction of a physical need, my heart told me otherwise. *Stupid girl!*

In that moment, something inside of me broke. Overhearing Oliver’s conversation severed the connection between my mind and heart. I had to get smarter. I needed to exercise wisdom. Who could I go to? My mother was gone. Although she would be disappointed in me, she would have assured me that I’d survive this and come out better for it. But the only one I’d ever leaned on now lay beneath six feet of earth, and if this turned out badly, and I found for certain that I was pregnant . . .

How many women had been in my shoes? How many had shared my fear in a hell shared by women but suffered in isolation? I’d had my share of loss, and though I told myself Oliver would never be mine, I realized that somewhere inside of me there had been a small seed of hope for that very thing. In truth hope was fragile. It disappeared like wishes in the wind, and after the conversation I’d just heard, I knew I could never approach him. In my girlish dreams I’d thought there might be a speck of decency hidden beneath the rumors. A glimmer or spark of integrity that I could appeal to. One that would prove him to be a responsible man to offer me help. Now? Well, now I realized that I was a fool.

I moved carefully so as not to let my presence be known. I looked for an inconspicuous route of escape. If I wasn’t careful I risked running into Oliver and his friend. That was something I wanted to avoid at all costs.

I started walking in the opposite direction from the place where the men had turned. Tears stung my eyes, threatening to breach my lids. It took everything I had to contain them. My emotions were raw.

I missed my mother. At that moment I would have given anything to have her wrap her arms around me. My racing thoughts kept pace with my feet as adrenaline fed panic flooded my mind.

My heart jumped from a trot to a gallop. *Would I sell the flower shop? Move to a different town to hide my shame—and the labels. My child would be called bastard. My god.*

The thoughts overwhelmed me, hooking my heart with a heavy weight until I felt I'd drown in a river of unshed tears, I raced down the street.

Crash!

"Oof! "Good Lord, woman!" Air rushed from his lungs as if I had sucker-punched us both. I nearly toppled over the old man. I quickly grabbed ahold of him to keep him from falling.

"Mr. Norris—I'm sorry. I didn't see you."

"Nor I you. We should watch where we're going." His matter-of-fact tone held a light-hearted, but condescending edge. Mr. Norris was well into his seventies, and the poor man walked with a cane. I could have hurt him.

He brushed his hands over his sleeves, straightening his jacket as he righted his posture. I expected to see anger, or at the very least irritation, in his eyes. Instead, they were kind. "Forgive me, my dear."

"I should be the one apologizing. I should have paid more attention to where I was going." He paused, giving me a concerned look. "Are you all right?"

As I'd just been thinking of my mother, his concern tugged at my heartstrings. Tears began to fall against my will.

"There, there," He consoled. "There's no need for all of that. No harm was done. It was merely a bump."

I tried to stop crying but could only hinder the flow. "I'm so sorry. I don't know why I'm behaving like this."

Mr. Norris studied me. "Mavis, why are you crying?" His eyes narrowed. "And what are you doing so far from town?" He looked up and down the street, then lowered his voice. "Does this have anything to do with Oliver Bennett?"

My eyes went wide, and my jaw dropped. "Why would you ask that?"

"Because I saw how cozy the two of you were at the Oaks." He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a handkerchief. "Here. Take this." He nudged my hand. I hadn't realized I was so far away from the shop. I didn't remember walking that far.

"Thank you." I took the linen and dabbed my eyes and nose. He waited patiently for me to compose myself. When I looked up, the old man was smiling. "There now. That's better. I can't stand to see a woman cry."

“I was walking. Thinking. I guess I lost track of time and distance.” I flipped my wrist and held out the handkerchief. “I have to get back to the store.”

He laughed. “If that’s your purpose, young lady, let me offer you a ride.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to trouble you.”

“Oh, pish-posh!” He waved his hand back-and-forth like an orchestra conductor. “We’ll have none of that.” He presented me with the crook of his arm. “Help this old man across the cobblestones. We can ride to Main Street together. I’m on my way there right now for a business meeting at the bank across the street from your shop. It would be negligent of me not to offer you a ride. After all,” he said, looking up at the sky, “it looks like rain and you have no umbrella.”

I nodded, accepting his kind invitation. Although it seemed as if I’d only been gone a few minutes, in truth I’d been gone much longer than planned. Mr. Lester would be wondering what happened to me.

“Thank you. I accept.”

“Splendid.” His smile widened making the corners of his eyes crinkle. “Simply splendid.”

Chapter 8

Once we arrived at the car, Mr. Norris's driver, Andrew, came around to the side where we stood. He opened the door, holding out a gloved hand to assist me. Mr. Norris waited on the curb as I stepped in and took my seat. Andrew stood by politely as his employer climbed in, ready to assist at a moment's notice. Once we were about our journey, Mr. Norris initiated conversation.

"Are you quite all right, Mavis? You appear a little flushed."

I dismissed his concern. "I'm fine, thank you."

His brows pinched together. "I might be an old man, my dear, but I'm not a fool." He paused for just a moment. "Allow me to forgo polite conversation and get right to the point: what is your involvement with Oliver?"

My eyes flew wide. I tried to hide my reaction by looking out the window.

"Come, come, my dear. There's no need to stand on ceremony with me. Your mother and I were very good friends. If I can help, it would be my pleasure to do so, and it would honor her memory."

I turned my head and watched as he opened a wooden compartment containing a decanter and two glasses. It was a beautiful little walnut bar hidden away behind a panel door with an ornate design in the inlaid wood. "Would you care for a drink?"

I didn't answer.

"Now, Mavis. You look like you could use a little something to take the edge off. Between friends it's nothing to worry about."

Although I knew that I should refuse, he was right. The truth was that I could use a drink about now—especially now that the topic of Oliver hung in the air. I nodded.

He smiled. My answer pleased him. Apparently, no one liked to drink alone. He leaned forward, removed the glass stopper, and poured at least three fingers. After he handed the glass to me, he poured one for himself, tipped it in my direction, and gave a toast. "To problem solving. May we have the wisdom of the gods."

"Here, here," I agreed and placed the glass to my lips. His toast rang true, a painful reminder than I might be in the type of trouble

only a god could fix.

I took a big gulp, completely unprepared for the burn. It was like I'd swallowed hell. I didn't care. I deserved to burn for behaving so stupidly. I quickly drained my glass and instantly felt the rush of alcohol as it went to my head.

I tried to push back the fear and panic so I could enjoy the ride. The Rolls Royce was beautiful. You didn't get to own a car like this without being a smart businessman. Maybe Mr. Norris was someone I could trust. After all, he was a friend of my mother's, and if I didn't find a way out of my predicament, eventually no one in town would have anything to do with me.

Mr. Norris once again pulled the top off the decanter and refilled our glasses. I had barely wet my lips when he spoke.

"Now, on to Oliver Bennett. Do you know him well?"

I lowered the glass, holding it on my lap. "I know of Mr. Bennett from seeing him around town. Doesn't everyone? After all, he's the owner of the newspaper. Everyone knows him, but to answer your question, no. Other than casually, we're barely acquainted."

"Oh, I think you're better acquainted than you let on, my girl."

Mr. Norris tipped his glass toward me, a knowing look in his expression. "In fact, it would be my guess those tears you tried to hide might have something to do with our good Oliver."

How could he know that? Did Oliver talk? Yes, she'd been foolish, and she would pay the price, but what did Mr. Norris know? If Oliver discussed her with Reginald, perhaps he'd talked to Mr. Norris as well. The idea of having her personal life bandied about was humiliating and insulting. A shot of dignity stiffened her spine. Suspicion narrowed her eyes.

"Why are you being nice to me? What's in it for you?"

The old man's expression sobered. "All right then. Let's dispense with the formalities and get to the point. I believe that we can help each other."

"Why would you want to do that—and what makes you think I need help?"

"Because I know Oliver, and I know his game. You aren't the first, my dear. His dalliances have proven costly before."

Heat crept up my neck and into my cheeks. I wanted to protest, but I couldn't. It was better that I maintained my silence. My fingers tightened around the glass as he continued.

"Let me be frank, Oliver has a reputation. His offenses with the ladies have produced problems. One such fiasco involved my niece. She was a naïve girl. Foolish, in fact. When she visited me last summer she snuck off with Oliver. I didn't learn of it until it was too late."

I studied him, noting the flash of pain that cut through his eyes. I

took the liberty of being as forthright with him as he had been with me “What happened to her?”

Sorrow slumped his shoulders and he suddenly looked as if he’d aged ten years.

Compassion and pity stirred inside of me, his reaction making me even more curious. His words wrenched my heart, weighing me down.

He took a swallow, quickly emptying the contents and then exhaled a sigh.

“Although our paths rarely cross, Mavis, I’ve known you since you were a child. Your mother was a special woman. Her flowers brightened my days for years. I was fond of her.”

He paused, shifting his eyes away from me as he looked off into empty space. He looked as if he struggled with what to say next, but I was sure he pondered a troubling thought. When he turned his attention back to me, his features tensed.

“Astrid was a lovely girl. She could have been a comfort to me in my old age. Oliver destroyed that.”

A million questions filled my head, yet I couldn’t find a way to voice one of them without overstepping boundaries.

For a moment I forgot my own troubles. Curiosity scratched my mind, its inquisitive itch growing with each tick of time. Dare I ask Astrid’s fate? We had a common thread in our stories. Oliver.

I could no longer stand the suspense. I had to know.

“What happened to her?”

He refused to answer, making the remaining ride awkward. Mercifully, the car came to a stop. Andrew came around to open the door.

Though my concerns weighed heavily on me, I offered him a smile. He seemed so sad.

“Thank you for the ride.”

“You forgot your handkerchief.” He handed the cloth to me.

“It seems I never have one when needed. I’ll return this to you once it’s laundered.”

He put up his palm in a halting motion. “No need, my dear. I have many more.”

Andrew opened the door for me. I had a million questions burning on my lips but voiced not one. Mr. Norris sensed my inquisitiveness, offering one final comment.

“There’s always collateral damage when you lose a loved one, Mavis. Don’t forget that.”

I took a few backward steps and watched as his car drove away. As I went to place the handkerchief in my bag, I felt a stiff edge. I unfolded it to investigate and found a calling card hidden within.

Chapter 9

Blue.

I focused on the chip of paint that hung from the ceiling. Whoever would have guessed that such a lovely color would seem a threat—but then lying spread-eagle on an examination table will make you think strange thoughts.

The card that Mr. Norris had given to me had led me to Dr. Phineas Maxwell. Somehow, Mr. Norris had guessed my dilemma. Perhaps his niece had suffered a similar circumstance, and his passing the card along to me was his way of not getting into embarrassing details.

After my initial shock at the possibility he might know the troubles I faced, I sucked up my pride and was grateful for the gesture. The old man was well connected. Unlike the backyard butchers I'd heard of that treated problems like mine, Dr. Maxwell was a well-respected physician. He treated most of the town, but unlike Dr. Lewis who accepted bartered payments, Dr. Maxwell counted the town's wealthiest as his patients. I'd known him in passing from growing up in the town but had never been his patient. He was pleasant when I first went to see him, but his demeanor changed when I handed the card to him, his eyes clouding over. That was the moment he noticed Mr. Norris's signature on the back. His features hardened with a look of disapproval, but he instructed me to come back to the office at the end of the day.

When I returned, no one other than the doctor was present. His nurse and secretary had already gone.

"Please remove your undergarments and shoes and get up on the table. You can leave your garters and stockings on. I'll cover you." He spoke to me over his shoulder. Metal instruments clanged as he prepared for the procedure. I did as he requested, wrapping both arms tightly around my waist. The self-hug gave me no consolation.

The doctor then cuffed my arm with his hand. I'd jumped as a needle pricked my skin. Instantly the elixir had run through my veins and pulled down the shades on my current reality. Rational thought had disappeared, and in its place was a woozy feeling that had my

thoughts hazily running together.

I hid behind the medicinal effect as I stared at the azure-colored chip of aged paint that dangled above my head. Under the light effect of whatever had been injected into my system, it reminded me of a circus acrobat. It turned ever so slowly, spinning with each slight puff of air as it held onto the ceiling directly above my face. The drug the doctor had administered was enough to dull my senses, but not enough to make me unconscious.

My eyelids fluttered as I struggled to keep them open. I was sleepy but still felt the nervous adrenaline coursing through me. If only the man had been more generous with the medication. Perhaps then I would have sunk into oblivion and, after today, could put this matter behind me.

I averted my gaze as the doctor put a sheet over me and then took a seat by my feet. When his hand brushed the inside of my thigh I jumped. My dignity was further bruised as his fingers delved deep inside me, and when I felt cold metal slide into my vagina, I slammed my eyes shut.

"This will be over soon. That shot I gave you was a sedative. It will help you to relax but will wear off quickly."

Time lost meaning. Now, above me, the fragile flutter of colored plaster hovered. It was enough to help distract me from the man who sat between my legs, carving out my insides. It wasn't, however, strong enough to blot out the pain.

"Ow!"

"Try not to move."

I had no choice but to obey. With each scrape of flesh from inside of me, I thought of Oliver. I should have known better than to have sex with him, but I'd been reckless. No man as charming as Oliver would ever lack for female companionship. He was probably engaged to the catty woman who'd hung on his arm in the shop that day.

I nursed my bruised heart. Although it was blatantly obvious to both Oliver and me that what we had was a fling, I suppose I'd harbored a secret hope that I was different. That maybe we could get to know each other better, and he would like me more than any other girl. It was foolish—*I* was foolish.

Suddenly a razor-sharp pain pierced my drowsiness, and I jumped. The pain cut through my muddled thoughts as well as my tender flesh. It was almost too much to bear. I gripped the table as I drifted in and out of a dream world. My fingernails dug into the sides of the table.

I screamed inwardly, the sound rebounding against what was left of my consciousness.

"It's almost over, Mavis." The doctor's tone was gentle and fatherly. The pain was beginning to dull. I descended into darkness,

suddenly very tired.

"It's finished."

I opened my eyes. Dr. Maxwell was standing over me. A rush of air brushed my face. I attempted to lean up on my elbows, but I was still groggy. I followed the doctor with my eyes as he turned his back to me and walked to a cabinet to set a metal tray down on the countertop. When he returned, he took a seat beside the table.

"You weren't pregnant, Mavis."

"Then what—?" I was shocked. I was confused. I was at a loss for words. I missed my courses, and I was nauseated. What else could it be? And what happened to my voice? It sounded rough.

"There was a piece of tissue hindering your flow and caused your nausea. It happens sometimes when the hymen is too thick and doesn't break properly during intercourse. I've seen it before, and it's easily remedied. I took care of it. You'll have some cramps and spasms for a few days, and you'll probably bleed for a day or two, but you're fine." He paused, placed his wrist on my forehead, and then pulled it back. I presumed it was to check for a fever. My mother used to do the same.

"You feel as cool as a cucumber. Lie here while I clean up, and don't worry; I'll make sure you get home safely."

I followed him with my eyes once again as he disappeared through another door. *Not pregnant.* A rush of relief washed over me. I blinked my eyes several times, trying to erase the groggy feeling from my head. When the doctor returned, he carefully slipped his arm beneath my upper back and placed me in an upright position. I swallowed the bile that threatened to spill as it rose from my stomach to my throat, but the doctor steadied me as I fought the unsettling wooziness. He stayed by my side, waiting for me to become clear-headed.

I wasn't a sickly person, and neither was my mother. We didn't have much need for a doctor, and my mother's death was sudden. We knew Dr. Maxwell from around town, but he was just an acquaintance. There was another doctor in town who accepted bartered payments and he was who we called when needed medical care. Dr. Maxwell seemed to be a kind man. I felt as if I should know him better because of small town living, but he was a man who kept to himself unless his services were needed. *Like today.*

"Do you feel clear-headed enough to stand?"

I nodded.

"Good." He handed me a cloth folded several times for thickness. "Put this inside of your undergarment." He laid an envelope beside me. "These pills are for pain."

Dr. Maxwell helped me to my feet, turned his back to afford me privacy while I dressed, and stayed nearby as a precaution while I

adjusted my clothing.

"You can turn around now. I'm decent."

When he turned toward me his expression was one of concern. Although, luckily, I hadn't been pregnant, he could have risked his reputation if his other services were found out. I wondered why he was willing to do that for me.

"I'm curious, Doctor Maxwell. May I ask you a question? I promise that, if you answer, you can trust my confidence."

He nodded.

"Why did Mr. Norris send me to you? There's more than enough gossip to go around in this town. Why take the chance? Although he seemed concerned about my particular situation, I'm really no one to him, and you have a reputation to protect."

His gaze fell, and his expression turned troubled. "Let's just say that Mr. Norris doesn't like to take chances. People are worth more alive; he can't use them if they're dead, and he knows I'll take every precaution to assure your health and safety."

"And you? What's in it for you? Once you looked at the card I could tell by the change in your expression you knew of my supposed condition, and what was expected from you. I'm not naïve. I'm well aware of what kind of trouble it could mean for you if you were discovered. Why didn't you refuse to see me?"

A humpf accompanied a rush of air. "No one refuses Mr. Norris, Mavis. Though I won't go into details, I would caution you to stay away from him if you can. He isn't as good a man as he would have you believe and never extends a favor without a purpose. What I will say is that he loves a good game of chess."

"I don't understand. What does chess have to do with any of this?"

"Everything—and pawns are an important part of the game."

Completely confused, I gave him a puzzled look.

"They're expendable."

It was all he would say. Perhaps it was the effects of the drug lingering in my system, but I couldn't make the connection. Maybe after some sleep I'd be able to revisit his meaning with a clearer head.

The doctor handed my purse to me and I slipped the pills inside. His eyes appeared older and more tired than when I'd arrived.

Extending his arm, he offered me a sad smile. "Come along now. Let's get you home."

Chapter 10

Mrs. Lester came to the shop for the next week. Though she and Mr. Lester didn't directly speak of my illness, I told them I wasn't feeling well, and the doctor suggested I rest. I whispered to Mrs. Lester that Dr. Maxwell had given me something for cramps. She smiled knowingly and mouthed the words "Oh. Yer monthly." With a pat to my hand, that was the end of the discussion. Both she and her husband pitched in and everything ran so smoothly I wondered how I ever did without them.

The doctor stopped in one day to purchase a bouquet for his wife. I was in the back room and heard him ask Mrs. Lester if I was feeling better. I instantly made an appearance, closing the curtains that divided the space just as Mrs. Lester was about to answer his question.

"Good afternoon, Doctor Maxwell." I came up behind Mrs. Lester. "I heard you asking after me." I slipped an arm around the older woman's waist. "How could I not be feeling better? Mrs. Lester here brings me the most delicious food. She says that it's to build my strength, but I fear her good cooking may have me visiting the dressmaker. She orders me to rest when she sees a hint of exhaustion." The sweet woman's expression grew soft as I sang her accolades. "She's quite remarkable really. She does it all. I'm going to try to convince her to stay on."

Mrs. Lester's close-lipped smile lifted her apple cheeks. She gave me a quick nod. "Yes, ma'am. I'd like that." She turned to the good doctor. "It was lovely to see you, sir. I'll get yer wife's flowers now, if you'll excuse me."

The doctor waited until Mrs. Lester went to prepare the bouquet before he spoke again.

"How are you really feeling, Mavis? Any fever or unusual pain?"

"I'm quite well, actually. Thank you for checking on me."

"Of course. I'm glad you're doing so well."

The bells on the door interrupted us with their clanging as another customer entered. The doctor's expression morphed from smile to scowl in an instant. It was Mr. Norris.

"Well, hello there, Phineas. I didn't expect to see you here. There's

a nasty stomach bug going around, I hear. I thought you'd be up to your eyeballs with patients."

"There's something going around. Some are calling the malady the grip. I'm uncertain the strain of virus behind it, but it comes on suddenly. I suspect tainted food, but it could be something else. My wife has been more than accommodating keeping my dinner warm every night. I thought it would be nice to surprise her with some flowers to show my appreciation."

"I would think that accommodating her husband was understood when she took wedding vows but, yes, to your credit, I'm sure she'll be surprised."

Mrs. Lester appeared with the bouquet. "Will this do, sir? I know your missus likes white blooms, so I put in as many as would fit."

"They're lovely. She'll be thrilled."

"As well she should, spending good money on a wife is a waste," Mr. Norris mumbled under his breath.

Mrs. Lester narrowed her eyes at the older man, but the doctor's compliment made her blush. She thanked him with a smile and a curtsy as she ran off to complete some tasks.

"Impertinent thing. Giving me a hard look. She should know her place," Mr. Norris grumbled.

I instantly came to her defense. "She does know her place. It's here, working for me—and she does very well at her job, thank you very much." I retaliated against his rude comments and took offense at his comments. His demeanor resembled nothing of the kindly old gentleman who'd offered me a ride, and his entitled attitude disturbed me. I gave him a hard look. How dare he insult my worker, a woman who was fast becoming my friend. He hadn't shown this side of himself before, and I found that he could be quite rude.

The doctor fished in his pocket to pay. I held up my hand. "Please. It's my pleasure."

Mr. Norris made it his business to comment regarding my generosity. "You'll never keep a business if you give away your wares."

I cocked my head at the crusty old man and gave him a disapproving look. "But that's exactly the point, isn't it? It's *my* business."

"I see where your girl gets her impertinence," he replied.

The doctor watched the exchange with disapproval in his eyes. He picked up the bouquet, placed his hat on his head, and tipped his fingers to the brim. "Thank you, again. My wife will love them."

I could tell he was anxious to exit the store and remove himself from the presence of Mr. Norris. Though he never indicated anything specific, it was apparent there was tension between them.

Once he closed the door behind him, I turned my attention to Mr. Norris. My tone reflected the chill I felt toward him. “And what can I do for you today?”

“My, my. So formal.” He paused. “How are you feeling after your ordeal? Most women need a bit of recovery time, but here you are working.”

“I’m well, thank you. What can I do for you today?”

“Mavis, I would suggest you correct your tone with me. I won’t stand for your disrespect. I did you a favor. I know what you went through, but I won’t tolerate your insulting attitude.”

He knew what I went through? He had no idea what I, or other women, went through, the mean old codger. His was the condescending attitude, not mine. I didn’t know if he did know the outcome of my procedure; I’d have to inquire of the doctor the next time I saw him. It was clear, though, this old man had no clue when it came to women. I wonder how well he would have tolerated someone invading his insides? Although he’d been nice enough during our first encounter, I was quickly learning he made it his business to know everyone else’s—and then expect them to follow his lead. I would not be one of his sheep.

His superior attitude offended me. Men—not all, but most—because of their sex and nothing else, ruled the world. The patriarchal society was of their making. Even a woman’s education had no bearing.

The upper-class women were expected to do well in school, but never use what they’d learned. Their goals were to be the wives of wealthy men, and they were supposed to perform to the expectations of their husbands, no matter the situation. Men were the kings of their castles, but as with all fairy tales, some kings were good, and some were not.

“Girl, we need to speak about Oliver,” he demanded.

I sucked in a breath, and shot him a smart retort, “I haven’t given him a thought.”

“Then it’s a good thing I came in today to remind you.”

I went rigid with anger. “My mother used to say that some people lived with two faces: the one they presented to the world, and their real one. Although you approached me with kindness when we last met, your attitude is quite changed. Tell me, Mr. Norris, which face are you wearing, because I see no sign of the friendly old man from that day.”

He ignored my question as he disdainfully regarded me. “Oliver.”

“We have nothing to discuss. Good day, sir!” I made an attempt at a dismissive turn, but he grabbed my wrist. I tried to jerk it away, but he held fast. His fingernails dug into my skin.

“I suggest you unhand me.”

“Not until we discuss Oliver.”

I spat my words through clenched teeth. “What about him?”

The corner of his lip curled into a sneer. His eyes were black, snake-like beads. He was enjoying it, but I refused to give him my fear.

He ran his tongue over his bottom lip, enjoying every drop of his vitriolic words. “Why, his elimination, of course.”

Chapter 11

"Elimination? Are you mad?" My eyes went wide with disbelief. He couldn't possibly be suggesting murder!

A Cheshire cat grin curved his lips. "Of course. Oliver is a cancer. He's indifferent. Dismissive. Superior. If left untreated, his evil will spread." He leaned on his cane. "Would you prefer a different option—especially when you, yourself, have been so deeply affected?"

"Everyone makes mistakes. We live and we die, and we do what needs to be done within our circumstances." He released my wrist and I snapped it back. "You have me mistaken for a criminal. Leave this instant, and I'll forget that you made the implication."

"You are a criminal," he seethed. "A life for a life, Mavis."

"Apparently you've been misinformed. There was no life to snuff out. It was a common medical procedure. I owe you nothing. I'll settle the account with the doctor myself."

"Heh, heh, heh. You really are a stupid one, aren't you? Don't you think I know that? I went to pay the man, but he told me there was no baby. I'll grant you that's the truth, but do you really think I'm stupid?"

Now I was puzzled. He had changed the subject and I wasn't following. He noted my confusion.

"I made sure that I sent my houseboy, Tommy Shaw, to fetch some headache powder from Maxwell. Imagine his surprise when he saw the doctor leaving with you. Of course, I mentioned to him that if the doctor wasn't in his office to go to my neighbor, Mrs. O'Brian, and ask for a packet of powder. Everyone knows that the woman is notorious for complaining of daily headaches, and she always has an ample supply of the drug. She would be more than happy to help me out." He lowered his voice and his lips slipped into a wicked smile. "She has a soft spot for me, you know."

His gloating made me sick. I knew exactly what he'd done. He'd set me up. Tommy Shaw was dimwitted. He loved to talk about everyone and everything. He surely would have told Mrs. O'Brian that he'd seen Dr. Maxwell helping me home. That woman couldn't keep anything to herself. She reveled in starting trouble by talking about other people

behind their backs. And Mr. Norris was right, she did have a soft spot for him. *Or, rather, she was soft in the head.*

"Ah. I see you're beginning to understand." He slithered close to me, making my skin crawl. "I have the power of life and death for your reputation, girl. One word from me and I can either invite ruin or pity into your world. I suggest you choose wisely."

I saw Basil Norris for the snake he was. His venom was toxic and depraved.

"What do you want from me?" The words dripped like poison from my tongue.

"You have two roads to choose from. Help me rid this town of Oliver Bennett, or I'll see to it that your reputation is dragged through the mud."

"But I didn't do anything—and you would put Dr. Maxwell's reputation at risk," I protested.

"Oh, but you did. You let Oliver crawl into your cunt—and do you think I give a flip about Phineas Maxwell? If so, you're mistaken. His reputation can go to hell with yours for all I care. Doctors can be replaced, and believe me when I say that no one would miss a flower shop. I'll let the judgment of the townspeople run you out of business." It was a verbal slap. His eyes bored into me, slicing me open with a rusty blade as my heart lay bleeding in my chest. *Damn him!* I wouldn't let him crush me under the weight of his words.

He came closer, devouring me with soulless eyes as his gaze traveled down my body. "Two roads, Mavis, cobblestone or dirt?" He grabbed my hair, pulling my head so that his lips grazed my ear. I tried to fight him off, but the pain of the strands being ripped from my head stunted my struggle. "But then, maybe you're like my Astrid. She was a girl who liked the dirtier road. A feisty little bitch, she was." He licked my lobe and I shivered in disgust. "I gave her a rough ride. Maybe I'll give you the same."

A burst of energy shot through me and I pushed him away before I vomited the bile erupting from my stomach. "Get out!"

The thought of that old bastard touching me made me ill. It took every ounce of discipline within me to school my reaction and regain my composure.

"Think carefully, Mavis. I could strip away anything you hold dear. Your shop, the good doctor—even your help. I don't think poor Lester could survive another mishap."

"Mr. Lester? What does he have to do with you?"

A sinister grin tugged at his mouth and his eyes darkened to a deathly black shade. "You really are a stupid girl, aren't you? Lester owed me and chose not to pay." His eyes bore into me and as a low cackled laugh escaped his lips. "Not all accidents are random."

My stomach lurched. His threat filled me with a sense of dread that wreaked havoc with my thoughts. I had to buy myself some time to figure a way out of this.

"I'll do as you ask. Just leave them alone."

I felt numb after I said the words. It was as if Mr. Norris had sucked all the air out of the room with his talk of death and doom. There was nothing left inside my soul but a black void. Oliver might be a cad, but he wasn't the disease in Norrisville. The evil that strangled the good people of the town was standing in front of me.

"Now there's a smart girl. Like it or not, Mavis, I expect you to hold up your end of the bargain."

He placed the tip of his cane on the floor and adjusted his hat. "The Oaks will host a ball to commemorate the town's founding. All of Norrisville will be there. We've received some criticism about our exclusion of women and, as women will never be members if I have my way, this is our way to pacify the feminist mindset. We've charged the women of the town to hold an auction, the proceeds of which will go to the needy. You will be their chairwoman."

My disgust for him further boiled my blood. I could feel heat flaming up my neck and into my cheeks.

"Convince Oliver to meet you at the Oaks. I'll take care of the rest."

My eyes widened with disbelief. "What? We barely know each other."

A belly laugh exploded from him. "My dear, don't be so coy. All you have to do is cozy up to the man. That won't be too hard now, will it? You've done it before, and I have it on good authority he sent poor Genevieve away. I'm sure he's anxious for some female companionship."

How could someone be so conniving? His blood was surely ice. His heart not red but frigid blue. He spoke about death as if it was nothing.

"I can't believe my mother was ever your friend." The words spilled from my mouth.

"And my whore." He quirked his brow. "How do you think she acquired the money for this shop?"

His revelation was a derogatory slap. Truth or not, it rang through the air. Rage splintered me from head to toe as evil danced in the eyes of the devil before me. I wanted to kill him.

Suddenly fear fell away, taking with it my emotions and my moral compass.

Chapter 12

I wore a cream satin gown with nothing underneath. The dress flowed seamlessly over my curves and accentuated my assets. If I were going to entice Oliver away from the crowd, I'd have to be wearing something tempting. I still wasn't privy to Mr. Norris's plan, but I was sure that my seducing Oliver was part of it. Although I'd extended an invitation and told him I'd meet him at the event, we'd barely exchanged a "hello" before he'd gone off to speak with a few friends, and I set about checking the auction tables.

"Mavis." I turned to see Doctor and Mrs. Maxwell. "You look lovely, my dear—and look at the silent auction tables! I'm impressed."

"I am too," Mrs. Maxwell chimed in. "In fact, I see quite a few beautiful things on which I'd like to bid. Would you be a dear and keep my husband company for a few moments? I'd like to spend a little of his money."

I offered the doctor's wife a graceful smile. "Of course."

"Wonderful." She turned to her husband. "Darling, I'll be back soon." She bussed a kiss to his cheek then disappeared into the crowd.

"It's been a while since I've seen your wife. She's as beautiful as ever and looks lovely tonight."

Dr. Maxwell's expression grew tender and showed that he was completely in love with the woman. "Thank you. I'm a bit biased, but I'd argue that she is the most beautiful woman in the world." His expression grew more serious. "How are you? The last time I saw you, you weren't at your best. Basil was doing his damndest to get under your skin."

"I'm fine." I clenched my jaw to keep my emotions in check.

He noted the clue proving I wasn't myself. "Why am I not convinced?"

"I'm not sure what you mean." I struggled to maintain my indifference. Dr. Maxwell had been nothing but kind to me. The hard shell I'd slipped over my usual tender persona began to crack beneath his perceptive gaze.

"Please. Let's talk." With a sweep of his hand, he directed me to an uncrowded corner of the room.

I eyed him suspiciously but politely accepted his invitation.

"What has he done, Mavis?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do. Basil isn't one for flowers. The only reason he has them at the bank is because every other business supports you, and he doesn't want to have people talking about him. What did he want with you that day at your store?"

A lump of fear formed in my throat. I tried to swallow but couldn't.

"Tell me," he insisted.

I turned away from him as I looked into the crowd.

"Please. I might be able to help."

"No one can help me," I blurted.

"Let me try."

His begged words were said with such sincerity my eyes met his. Care and concern blanketed me like a warm hug. Suddenly, I was homesick for my mother. I missed our talks. I missed her hugs. The doctor and his wife were old enough to be my parents, and the sternness in his eyes reminded me of the look my mother would give to me when she knew something was wrong and I refused to tell her. She'd keep at me until I exposed the problem. As his eyes searched me, I knew deep in my soul he wouldn't give up trying to help until I let him.

"He wants Oliver gone. He hasn't told me how, but I know it will happen tonight."

His smile was warm. "Is that what's bothering you? Basil has never made a secret of the fact he dislikes Oliver Bennett. If it were up to him the young man would be dead."

I swallowed hard as tears burned my eyes. Dr. Maxwell noted my distress.

"Is that it? Do you have tender feelings for Oliver?"

"No. Yes. That's not it." My answer made no sense as an onslaught of emotions rose to the surface, and I struggled to contain them. It was no use. I became transparent beneath the doctor's keen observation.

"I know of Oliver's reputation, but he isn't a horrible man. Lots of men are randy until they find the right woman."

"It isn't Oliver. It's just that Mr. Norris hates him. He wants me . . . he wants me to . . ."

He waited for me to finish as he studied my reaction. Suddenly, he gave me a hard look. His jaw tensed, his eyes narrowed, and his mouth grew tight. "It isn't Oliver that has you this upset. It's Basil, isn't it?"

I couldn't move. He read the fear in my eyes.

"Tell me what he wants you to do," he demanded. "Tell me now."

I could barely speak the words, the strain stealing my voice and leaving a trace of sound that was barely audible.

"He wants me to kill him."

* * *

I WAS TERRIFIED, but I told Dr. Maxwell everything. What Norris said in the flower shop. The threats he'd made that weren't specific but enough that I worried for the safety of every person whose name fell from his lips.

I internalized my near mental breakdown when I told him that I didn't think I had it in me to murder someone. Although my insides shook I forced my voice into a monotone when I told him that Norris had given me no choice; in order to save lives, I had to take one.

"How?" Dr. Maxwell's tone was calm.

"I don't know. He said he would tell me tonight. I was supposed to get Oliver to the gala and the rest would be revealed to me after we arrived."

"I want you to do exactly as I say. Will you trust me?"

My troubled mind was sinking into deep, dark thoughts, but Dr. Maxwell remained calm.

"Go back to your duties. Act as if this conversation never took place. Once he tells you what he wants you to do, find me. I'll take care of the rest."

"But what if he—"

"I'll take care of it. I've been planning to have a little talk with Basil, and I promise you, after tonight his reign of terror will be over." He took my hand and gave it a comforting pat. "Go on, now. Tomorrow this will all be behind us."

Chapter 13

"Aren't you a pretty piece?" My blood chilled as the old man came up behind me. "As shiny as a new penny and just as cheap, I'd say. Oliver will be sniffing you out soon."

The man made my skin crawl. I kept all expression from my face, but it was as if he could smell my disgust.

He let out a sinister laugh. "I must admit. You've solicited some desirable items for the silent auction. They're sure to raise a tidy sum for the needy. Seeing as you've done such a splendid job, I may further solicit your services to raise additional funds for the poor. I have some very wealthy friends who would happily take advantage of your talents."

A sudden jolt of pain crossed my eyes and I reacted. My hand shot to the space, and I gently rubbed with my fingers to ease the stab.

"Poor dear." His words dripped with sarcasm. "I have some headache powder for you."

"I don't want anything from you."

"Of course, you don't. It isn't for you. It's for Oliver."

Confusion settled in my furrowed brow, but my voice held no emotion. "If Oliver has a headache, give it to him yourself."

"That's your job."

I didn't miss the sarcasm in his tone, but I had grown impatient with his mind games. Defiance sparked my broken resolve like dry tinder, flaming my anger. "Stop talking in riddles, old man. Tell me what you want me to do or release me from your insanity."

His eyes narrowed. The look in them made me sick to my stomach. I turned my face toward the crowd as he stood beside me for further explanation. "Oliver is here. In fact, I just shared a glass of my favorite libation with him. It's one that I reserve for only my closest friends." I could see from the corner of my eye that he grabbed ahold of the chain securing his pocket watch. "I would say that sometime within the hour he will have a terrible headache." He nudged my hand and slipped something into my palm. When he did so he touched my skin, and I turned to stone. "Take this and offer it to him as a headache remedy. That's all you have to do." He slapped his cane against my

rear end, and I flashed him a murderous look. He laughed. “Such a spitfire! I’ll bet a few cracks across your lily-white ass with my cane would set you straight.”

He savored the thought with a lascivious look and then dismissed me. “Now run along and be a good girl and get me a bourbon. Keep an eye out for Oliver. When you see evidence of his distress, you will come to his rescue. With any luck, you can convince him that he should go home. Retire for the evening. Entice him with promises. I don’t care how you do it but be nice to the man. It’s the least you can do for him seeing as he won’t awake in the morning.” He cackled hideously.

My head snapped in his direction as my skin chilled beneath the luxurious fabric as I pieced together his plan. *Poison!*

Disgust shriveled my insides. Vitriol coated my words. “You’re a sick bastard.”

His mouth twisted into a sardonic smile. “I know.”

* * *

I HATED NORRIS, but I did as he asked and got the old man his drink. I shoved it in his grubby hand, and then went to find the doctor. My blood had turned to ice and, if not for the lining inside the dress, my body would have betrayed and embarrassed me due to my lack of undergarments. I harbored silent screams and quickly distanced myself from Basil Norris before they clawed their way from my throat and painted me insane.

Dr. Maxwell was tall, and I spotted him easily. When I was certain we were out of earshot from the other guests, I told him everything. The words rushed out of me. I wasn’t sure they made sense, but the doctor took in every one of them.

“Show me what he gave you.”

I pulled out the envelope and he took it from me. He dipped his little finger inside and then placed it on the tip of his tongue. His eyes widened. Anger fed the fury I saw in them. I looked away, terrified. Although the doctor wanted to help me, the truth was that I could see no way out other than to commit a crime.

“Basil Norris is a horrible excuse of a man. He manipulates people to get what he wants. He’s a menace and a threat. What did he tell you to do with this?

“He told me that he put something in Oliver’s drink to produce a headache and instructed me to find him and offer him this powder as a remedy.” I felt my bottom lip start to tremble. “It isn’t headache powder, is it?”

He didn’t confirm or deny the contents, just placed the envelope in

his left pocket and pulled a similar packet from his right.

“Find Oliver. I don’t know what Basil gave to him, but I know what drug he intended for you to give to him. Use this instead. It will ease his discomfort.”

“But, but . . . I can’t. What if he finds out? He threatened all of you. I can’t let him hurt you, your wife, or Mr. and Mrs. Lester.”

“He knows exactly what he’s doing. You’ll be a slave to his whims for the rest of your life.”

“Yes. I realized that when I took the envelope.” Dejection carried on a whisper made me drop my head.

“You go to Oliver. I’ll take care of Basil.” The doctor’s usually soft tone was determined but eerily calm. I would have tried to analyze his meaning, but time was of the essence.

I let the doctor carry out his plan, all the while knowing my part in it. I shook off my trepidation, put on a pleasant smile, and went to find Oliver.

Chapter 14

It took no more than a few steps into the main part of it when I spied Oliver. He was engaged in conversation with two other men. As I drew closer to the group, it was obvious that Oliver was beginning to suffer the effects of whatever it was that Mr. Norris had slipped into his drink. His coloring was off, and he looked a little peaked. I inhaled a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and approached the group.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Are you enjoying the festivities?" The smile I plastered on my face was so wide I felt the stretch, and my tone was light and cheerful. All three men turned their attention to me, but only one of them spoke.

"Good evening, Mavis. You're looking lovely tonight." He turned his attention to Oliver. "We were having a fine time until Oliver here took a nasty turn."

I slipped a mask of concern over my expression. "Oh? Is there anything I can do to help?"

Oliver's furrowed brow and pained eyes plagued me with guilt. "It's nothing. A headache is all."

I tucked my clutch under my arm and held out my hand. "I can fix that," I promised. "Come with me."

"Leave it to a woman to always fix a man's problems," one man said.

"Now, gentlemen," I said matter-of-factly. "You know that a lady is always prepared for any emergency." My comment elicited a group chuckle. "I anticipated a headache myself, what with all the goings on, I'm happy to give it to you."

"I wouldn't want to trouble you," Oliver answered.

"Come now, I don't need it and it's no trouble at all."

* * *

It was obvious to me that Oliver tried to downplay his pain. He swallowed the mixture in one gulp. As he bent to place the empty

glass on the table, I saw Mr. Norris smiling a few feet away. A smug expression crept over his face, filling every wrinkle with satisfaction. He turned his back to us, confident his plan was underway.

"Thank you for helping me," Oliver responded. "After the way I treated you I don't deserve your kindness."

His words brought me back to the underlying hurt he'd caused, making me momentarily abandon my preoccupation with Mr. Norris's dastardly plan.

"Why would you say that?"

"Surely you must think me a cad. I would be surprised if you didn't, especially after our night together." He touched my cheek, tilting my face to better see my birthmark. "Is this why I've heard some people call you Twinkle? For this little star by your eye?"

He released me and I looked into his beautiful eyes. My heart ached over the silly, childish images I'd conjured of the two of us together.

Stars have always been special to me since I was born with one as a birthmark. They were special to my mother too. She used to tell me that if you wished upon a star your wish would come true. I'd wished on many stars since she'd passed away. I'd wished for her business to be successful under my care. I'd wished for a long and happy life. I'd even wished for someone to love. But it was the last wish I'd made that seemed most important. I'd wished death on the man who'd played me for a fool.

"YOU DON'T HAVE to admit it to me, but every time I've seen you since that night, I could tell by your expression that I hurt you. That was never my intent. In fact, quite the opposite is true. First, I wanted to close out my chapter with Genevieve."

"Oh?" Now he had my full attention.

"Genevieve and I never had an arrangement. There were no promises made on my part of any sort, but she led her family to think I'd done so. I thought it only proper to go to her father and discuss the matter. Seems that Genevieve's fickle immaturity is not a secret to him. Apparently, she was playing her game with several men.

Her father revealed he was approached with an engagement proposal the day before, and he gave his blessing. The young man was an acquaintance of Genevieve's aunt. They met during her visit to New York. Her father and I agreed that, given Genevieve's nature it would be best to let her believe her father broke the news to me."

The beginnings of a smile tipped up the corners of his mouth. "To tell the truth, we ended our meeting with a glass of port, both of us knowing full well the young man would have more than his hands full once married."

The news lifted a weight from my heart, but I cautiously kept my emotions in check. “I’m sure you’re relieved. I’m glad for you.”

“As am I. Although I would never have married her, I wouldn’t have wanted to hurt her. I went to her father to learn how best to spare her feelings. The matter worked out better than I could have planned.” He paused. “That brings me to you. The way I left you was callous.”

I closed my eyes, attempting to mask the injury he’d inflicted on my heart. Oliver closed the distance between us.

“I hope you’ll forgive me. After our night together I felt a longing for you I’ve never felt for another woman. It gnawed at me constantly. I wanted to explore it further and hoped that you would feel the same—but the matter with Genevieve needed to be settled first. I’m well aware of my reputation and I’ll admit, I’ve earned it. But my feelings for you were foreign to me. If I were to approach you, I wanted no ill-conceived notions of a lovesick girl to come between us. I found myself at quite a loss regarding the situation. In fact, I solicited the advice of a friend. Reginald set me straight on a few things. I wanted to assure my actions would serve everyone’s interests.”

My heart took flight beneath his devastatingly handsome grin. He offered an explanation for what I’d overheard. More than that, he cared for me.

Oliver went to take my hand but pulled back as a beehive of activity erupted in the ballroom.

“Help! Find Dr. Maxwell. It’s Basil Norris. He’s collapsed!”

Epilogue

The whole town was witness to the public demise of Basil T. Norris. Some of the younger men carried him across the street to Dr. Maxwell's office, and although the doctor was a fine physician, he was unable to revive him. I would like to say that the loss of a life is a sad event, but in this case, I felt no such thing. Basil was dead, and in my opinion, the world was better for it.

The telltale jingle bells rang, interrupting my thoughts. It was Dr. Maxwell just one day after Basil Norris had passed from this earth into hell—or at least that was my hope. It was just the two of us as I had given Mr. and Mrs. Lester the day off.

"Good morning, Doctor Maxwell. What can I do for you today?"

"Good morning." Concern was written on his face. "That was quite an end to the evening last night."

"Yes, it was. I hate to admit that death is good for my business, but I've had orders coming in all day for the Norris funeral. I gave my employees the day off today. Lord knows they'll be working well into the night tomorrow to fill them all."

He offered me a weak smile.

"You seem as though something's troubling you." I studied his expression which was more somber than usual. "Can I help?"

He fidgeted with the brim of his hat before turning his focus on me. "I have to ask you a question. Did you know what was in that envelope?"

I shook my head. "Not for certain. I thought it might be something harmful, which was why I gave it to you. I saw your reaction when you tasted it, and thought my suspicions were confirmed. Don't you know what was in there?"

He nodded. "I did. I mean, I do. It was digitalis. It was Norris's heart medicine. There was more than four times his prescribed dose. I know that I put each dose in a separate envelope."

"That was what he wanted me to pass off to Oliver as headache medicine?"

"Mavis, if Oliver had ingested the contents of that envelope, he surely would be dead."

Relief spread through me that I followed my instincts and hadn't carried through with the old man's plan. "Then I must ask, was it you? Did you give Norris the contents?"

"Me? No! I've taken an oath—do no harm."

"I'm confused; Mr. Norris sent me to you because—"

"Yes. And I know what you're thinking, but I don't feel like I'm doing anything wrong in those instances. I feel that I'm saving lives when I help a woman in trouble. If I didn't, those women would die under an unskilled hand. Some do. Most have more children than they can feed. That thought weighs more heavily on my conscience than the procedure itself."

"But I gave you the envelope."

"And I didn't use it. It's still in my possession. I was going to find Basil to confront him about what he was asking you to do. I intended to tell him I would expose him."

"I'm afraid I'm still at a loss. Mr. Norris told me he would destroy the people I cared about, including you. He wanted Oliver gone because he'd gotten his niece pregnant, and that the dear girl died from a botched procedure."

"Oh, did he?" His expression morphed from serious to sardonic. "It was Basil who raped the girl. He brought me in to help when she was bleeding to death after trying to rectify the situation herself, but I couldn't help. She was nearly dead when I arrived. She'd ruptured her insides with a knitting needle."

"So, he lied about Oliver being the culprit?"

"He did. Basil Norris was a king of lies. He was a master manipulator." Sadness slumped his shoulders. "I'm not sad he's dead. I should feel some pity or sorrow for any death, but I feel nothing for his loss. Well, nothing other than relief. I didn't kill him. I don't have that much courage." His chin dropped as he silently condemned himself.

"I disagree! It took courage to confront him, even if you didn't get the chance to do so." I reached behind me and grabbed a bouquet I'd finished before he arrived. "Here. Take these to your wife. Enjoy your evening and her company and forget all about Basil Norris. He doesn't deserve any more of your time or your pity."

"I might offer you the same advice, dear girl." He looked down at the bouquet. "You're a good person, Mavis. Your mother would be proud of you."

I pondered his words as the door closed behind him, and then entertained my own thoughts. *Is murder a sin when ridding the earth of evil?*

It was me who fetched Norris his drink—and I emptied half the poison packet into it before I gave it back to him. I entertained no

regrets and hoped he burned in hell.

I shrugged, shaking off what might be left of a guilty conscience over what I'd done. Flowers were much more forgiving than people. They made me smile, and for the first time in a while, a smile lit up my face as happiness lightened my heart. Basil T. Norris would have the most beautiful funeral flowers, and I would take the credit.

God rest his black-hearted soul.

The End

Prologue

April 15, 1912

"Don't be afraid, Abby. Just look at me."

There was no madness in Isidore Eisenberg's eyes, despite the chaotic circumstances. His tone was calming, something his wife desperately needed. She was shaking, the motion rattling her body all the way to the bone. Abigail didn't know if it was from fear, the cold, or a combination of the two, but her husband's sweet words tucked around her like a warm blanket. It was the only comfort she could feel.

"Do you think it will take a long time, or that there will be much pain?" Though Abby asked the questions, she wasn't confident she genuinely wanted the answer. It would take however long it would take; there was nothing more they could do. The outcome of their circumstances was bleak, at best.

As the couple lay side by side in the darkness, Abby tried to think of something on the bright side. She could only think of one good thing about their current situation, that they were together. She wasn't a brave woman. Though she hated knowing her sweet husband, Izzy, shared her fate, there was a part of her that was grateful she wouldn't have to face the horror of death alone. She looked into her loving Isidore's eyes, knowing full well he read her thoughts.

"Now, Abby," he said as his hand brushed her cheek, "don't worry, my love. This situation is something we can't control. We must look forward. Our time after today will be an eternity, dearest. What we're going through—what is happening right now—is a temporary inconvenience. We've always known death was a certainty, we simply never knew when it would come. And isn't this exactly what we'd hoped for? To be in each other's arms until the end of time?"

Abby nodded. Her husband always spoke the truth, and today was no different. From the day she'd married him, Abby had told him he was her life, her breath, and her destination. On that beautiful June day, she'd also promised to stay by his side for the remainder of her existence. By the end of today, her promise would be fulfilled.

An eerie whine was followed by a loud bang, causing the iron bed to shift. Muffled screams in the distance carried through vacant staterooms and hallways and found their way to the couple in cabin C-26. The sounds were frightening, immediately bringing to mind how quickly their impending fate would come to pass. Fear flooded Abby's

veins with adrenaline. Her body jolted, every limb reacting to what she knew was in store. Death.

Though she quickly tried to hide her reaction and regain her composure, Isidore noticed. He knew her so well. Sadness veiled his gaze, a look Abby couldn't remember seeing in all their years together. But a solution for this disaster wasn't within her husband's control, nor was any of it of his making, for if Izzy could have changed their circumstances, she had no doubt he most certainly would have. He squeezed her hand, lassoing her torturous thoughts to capture her attention.

"Abigail, do you remember our second date?" His voice was hoarse, and his teeth chattered, yet he put on a smile for his beloved wife.

"Of course I do, but our first date stands out equally as well. Don't you remember? Our first date was a disaster."

"Yes. It was a pitiful excuse for a picnic," Izzy laughed. "My gallant attempt to chase the ants off of your skirt caused quite a ruckus—and captured the notice of everyone in the park!"

"Of course, it did! As the bugs fell off my skirt, they scrambled up my legs, and you went under my shift after them. It was scandalous! Imagine if you'd seen a young man putting his head up our daughter's skirt. I can't even fathom it!"

A broad smile hooked the corners of his mouth. His lips were perfect. They were plump, but not like a woman's. They were entirely masculine. Whereas some of the women Abby knew tried to keep their husband's advances to a minimum, she'd welcomed every kiss her Izzy had shared with her these past thirty years. Abby hadn't known much about life and men when they first married because she'd been but a girl. Still, from that very first night spent in Izzy's arms, he'd played her body as expertly as a finely tuned instrument, bringing it to life.

Their life together had been magical. The two enjoyed everything about each other. Abby especially loved her husband's touch. His simple, tender acts warmed her heart, and sex was a pleasure, despite her mother's instructions that she wouldn't enjoy that particular wifely duty. Her alone time spent making love with Izzy had never been a chore. Even at this age, and for as long as they'd been together, they'd done so often, sometimes more than once a day.

Though, for some, that might seem scandalous, Abigail relished the feeling of her husband inside her. The skin on skin connection was something she'd come to cherish. Remembrance of those times made her realize that stolen moments such as those would be no more, and the thought made her suddenly feel lonely.

Melancholy breezed through her mind. Elsewhere in the world, this night would play out very differently for a vast number of couples. Those lucky people would have hopes and dreams

intermingled with rapture, where, instead, theirs would be, quite literally, drowned in grief. Where others in the world would enjoy touches and kisses holding promise, Abby and Izzy's would end with a final goodbye.

A shiver possessed Isidore. His arm shook as he tried in vain to control the reaction and hold Abigail close. She shifted, turning on her side to ease his discomfort. Pain and stiffness resulting from the frigid atmosphere only allowed her to move an inch at a time. She refused to let it deter her, and she moved, albeit slowly, to allow herself what little comfort she might find. When she had finally settled, they were so close that barely a breath separated them. Abby was drained from the small effort, and Isidore trembled from the cold. The lids of his beautiful, brown eyes fluttered, his dark lashes lingering on his face too long, freezing against the skin above his cheekbones. Abby knew that if she didn't keep him talking, he would fall into a deep sleep, never to awaken.

She spoke to him, not willing to let him go just yet. All that Abby needed was to hear his voice, even if it would be for the last time. She snuggled close, gently nudging him. Her voice was barely audible as the freezing temperatures strained her vocal cords.

"Izzy, why did you ask if I remembered our second date?"

His eyes slowly opened. Even though he was exhausted, her sweet husband responded to the sound of her voice. He'd done the same when they were at home. He always had. Abby was never an inconvenience to Isidore, and, for that, she was grateful. Unlike their counterparts, her husband never behaved as if she were an obligation he had to tolerate. Every single day of their married lives, Isidore gave his wife the best of himself, never what was left of his time at the end of the day.

"Our second date?" Izzy paused, his memory was taxed, and his gaze thoughtfully traversed the blank space above them. Slowly he recalled asking the question just a few moments before. Abby traced over his forehead with a gloved hand, a gesture she'd repeated many times before, allowing her thumb to trail across his skin, lingering on the furrowed lines of his brow. "Ah, yes," he croaked. "I remember now." His concentration had given him another few moments of clarity, and he looked deeply into his Abby's eyes.

"By the time of our second date, my fate was sealed. You claimed me."

"Me?" Abby's question was laced with surprise. "What did I do?" She coughed as her trembling hand moved down his face and palmed his cheek. Izzy pulled her closer and held her tighter, the action causing a pained expression on his face. His eyes, however, reflected nothing but tenderness.

"It was your eyes, Abigail. They enslaved me. On our first date, they drew me in—those beautiful baby blues." He cleared his throat, his gaze turning a bit more serious. "However, it wasn't until our second date that my poor heart bore the brunt of their impact upon me. Your gaze branded my soul. I knew by the end of that evening I never wanted to spend another day of my life without the pleasure of looking into them every night. It was that day I decided we would wed. I was determined to do whatever necessary to make you agree to marry me."

Abigail's heart broke beneath the sincerity of his words. "Oh, Izzy!" A sob clutched her throat. The impact of their circumstances made her want to cry, but it seemed that even tears were denied her in the Arctic atmosphere. "It seems so cruel we've been robbed of our future together. I'm jealous of those that will survive this. It's maddening to think we planned our lives so meticulously, and now our careful preparations to enjoy the rest of our days won't come to fruition. I don't want this to be the end. Despite your high opinion of me, I am, admittedly, a selfish woman. I want more time with you."

Izzy gave his wife a tender smile. "As do I, my dearest, but we are not the controllers of our fate. One day at a time is how we measure our happiness, and even that we aren't promised."

Suddenly, the ship lurched, nearly catapulting them from their bed. A cruel, pain-filled shudder attacked Isidore as a piece of their luggage skimmed quickly across the rising water and slammed into his back. Abby opened her mouth to scream, but no sound escaped as Izzy's head snapped back from the impact. She quickly gained her composure, knowing their time was limited. She was terrified he'd been knocked unconscious, and what few, precious moments they had left, might have been stolen away by the collision.

"Izzy!" Abby's voice was panicked and hoarse, her cry a mere croak. "Izzy, please don't go! I need you."

Though the action was delayed, Isidore gradually opened his eyes. Relief flooded Abby as she gazed into the warm brown orbs that had anchored her through her entire adult life, and, though weak, she offered him a smile. Tucking her arm around his waist, it instantly locked into place due to the bitter cold.

"I'm not going anywhere without you, Abby. Hold onto me. Look into my eyes. Let the fear fade away."

Always the obedient wife, Abby did as her husband requested, anchoring herself in the love reflected in the warm, brown pools. It was the only heat between them. The piercing and penetrating cold had caused the blood to drain from his handsome face, leaving only a frosty remnant of his natural, healthy color. There were things to say, tender thoughts that needed to be voiced, and only this moment to

express them.

"My sweet, sweet man. I'll say the same words to you now that I said the day we married. You are and have been, my life, Isidore Eisenberg. As I think upon our journey together, I have not one moment of regret. With my last breath, I want you to know that I am, still, desperately in love with you.

Her confession warmed his heart, and Izzy knew that they had, at best, moments to say their final words to each other. "I'm so sorry, my dearest love. This trip was supposed to be an adventure, not our end, but it's only one of the many destinations you and I have shared. It seems our next journey will, hopefully, be to heaven. I won't grieve, because at least there we'll be together."

Tears wouldn't come, but the effort stung the corners of Abby's eyes. A sudden movement made her flinch as a sloppy, frigid wave splashed atop her woolen coat. It triggered a layering effect starting with outerwear and then causing the skirt beneath it to quickly saturate with wetness. The heavy material slapped against her skin, so cold that it burned. The icy seawater was littered with chunks of ice, the pieces now quickly closing in on them as it rose above the top of the mattress. Abby trembled, terror clobbering her with the same ferocious impact as their ship when it hit the iceberg.

The room pitched at a near ninety-degree angle, and the bed catapulted into the wall at their feet. Again, Abby tried to scream, but dread clutched her throat, squeezing away all sound. She was terrified she would be torn apart from her husband and launched into open space. Sensing her fear, Isidore grabbed her with whatever strength he had, seizing any precious moments they might have left. In a flash, the water was around their necks, then chins, rising quickly to just beneath their mouths.

"Abby. Look at me."

Panicked, Abby looked one last time into the eyes of the man who had always made her feel safe and loved. Her quickened breaths burned her throat and chest, fueled by fear. They had seconds, at best, to share one last breath. Isidore had managed to squeeze out a final tear, and with blue lips and chattering teeth, pressed his lips one final time to the woman who would forever own his heart.

"Don't be afraid, my love. We'll be together again. Look for me. I promise; I will always find my way back to you."

Chapter One

Present Day

BWI Airport, Baltimore

"Dear sweet baby Jesus! Do you think any of these people know to cough into their elbow instead of sharing their cooties with the rest of

us?" Skylar Harrison mused aloud as she ground her teeth. She had little patience for stupidity. A self-professed germaphobe, her skin crawled every time someone sneezed in her direction.

"I know, right?" Skylar's friend and editor, Vincent Mannon, snapped back a retort as he sighed. He sat in the seat right beside her, sharing Sky's silent hope that their next stop on this business trip wouldn't be to one of those express medical centers for some antibiotics.

Sky huffed and nodded her agreement. She hated business trips, but they were a necessary evil for a journalist, and her work had taken her all over the world. She'd accomplished much, delving into the heart of her stories and describing them in such detail that many publications clamored for her work. *Time* magazine had featured her latest piece. Vince was convinced a Pulitzer was in her future, having witnessed the effect Skylar's stories had on her readers. He encouraged her to continue writing in-depth articles, but Skylar was now working on her third book as Eden Skye. Her goal was for her novel to hit the trifecta of bestsellers lists*, USA Today*, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Using her real name and reputation, she could quickly have done so. Instead, she'd adopted a pen name and was publishing her books independently. Once she accomplished what she'd set out to do, she planned to use her experiences in a series of articles. The world of self-publishing had upset the control traditional publishing houses once held. Amazon had opened a new world to those with vivid imaginations, and she planned to chronicle every detail of her experience and report what she found on her venture.

"I'll be right back." Vince left his backpack on the ground, giving Skylar a smirk as he approached the Cinnabon counter. A few minutes later, he returned, the proud owner of one of the giant, sticky pastries.

This wasn't anything new. Vince had a wicked sweet tooth and indulged it whenever they traveled. The airport kiosks were the perfect excuse for a treat, tempting and teasing even the most adamant dieter with savory sights and smells. Skylar followed Vince with her eyes, her judgmental expression having no effect on him as he returned to his seat with the sugary confection in hand.

"Don't you have diabetes?" She gave him a disapproving look.

"I do, but I take insulin." He shrugged. "Don't judge me."

"I'm not." Her statement was weak and flat.

"Yes, you are. It's not like I do this every day. Besides, I didn't eat breakfast," Vince scolded in a hushed voice. When anyone, especially Skylar, pointed out health concerns related to his glucose level, he became irritated. As far as he was concerned, his blood sugar numbers weren't anyone's business but his own. Besides, life was too short not

to indulge in tasty food.

Just to spite her, he held the sticky roll in the air and moved it slowly toward his mouth, making a full display of taking that first, sweet bite. He then closed his eyes, enraptured as the sweet taste hit his tongue. When he opened them again, he smiled devilishly at her as he chewed.

Skylar rolled her eyes, turning away. It was too early to be goaded into a discussion about the benefits of a healthy diet. Instead, she reached down, unzipped the top of her laptop bag, and rummaged around for a pencil. Vince had his obsession with sweet things, and she had a thing for mechanical pencils. She loved them and purchased a pack nearly every time she went to stores like Target and Walmart. Pencils were forgiving. Their erasers permitted a person to make mistakes. What she didn't like were pens. Everything about them was too final. If she made a mistake with a pen, her OCD dictated she rip out the page and start all over again. No one had time for that nonsense, and that was what made pencils the number one choice of perfectionists everywhere.

"What are you writing?" Vince peered over Skylar's shoulder, making her pull her work a little closer to her chest.

"Nothing, nosey. Just looking at your edits."

"The edits are done." His tone was flat. "Move on to the next book." The hair on the back of Skylar's neck bristled. She didn't take orders, especially from someone on her payroll. There was a way to voice his opinion nicely, but Vince rarely did so.

"That isn't me, and you know it. I always re-edit when I get my stuff back." The monotone statement was one she'd delivered many times over. How long would it take for people to understand the luxury of being an indie author? Control. Skylar would always have the final say on her work as long as she published independently.

"I get what you're saying, but you have to ask yourself if it's the best way to use your time. That's why you pay an editor."

She rolled her eyes, partially because she knew Vince was right and, also, because she knew she should let the story go and move on to the next in the series. There was a vast difference between writing an exposé and writing fiction. The character's lives she created were entirely at the whim of her imagination. There was only one problem, she became attached to her characters as she developed them. As she grew their personalities, they became as real to her as the man sitting beside her. It was hard to let them go once they were published. Not so with a piece for a magazine. Those were facts. This was fiction.

She ignored him, reaching into her bag once again to find a notebook. Vince's expression held a question. "I'm fleshing out the next story. I'm not exactly sure where I want to take it."

"So just get your thoughts down on paper and let me do the rest. Use your imagination, and I'll polish the words. You can't drag your feet, Sky. There's too much competition."

Though he spoke while chewing a mouthful of food, her disapproving look wasn't lost on him. He put his hand in front of his mouth to be polite and kept right on talking. Thankfully, only two more bites, and he'd be finished.

"This is really delicious. You should try one." He mumbled the words, pausing a moment to swallow. As he brought a napkin to his lips, he wiped away the flicked remnants of white icing that remained.

"Excuse me."

Skylar and Vince simultaneously looked up. The man sitting directly across from them broke in on their conversation. He had his laptop in front of him while he worked at one of the airport computer stations. Apparently, he'd been listening as they talked.

"I couldn't help but overhear you talking about edits and rewrites. Are you an author?"

His expression was sincere, his eyes gentle. Skylar was instantly drawn to the rich, velvety sound of his words. Some men were famous for their voices being their most prominent feature. This guy could have capitalized on that attribute.

"I'm an editor. She's an author," Vince replied. As expected, her editor's welcoming delivery and friendly mannerisms drew the stranger in.

"I'm sitting here working on a story. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" He gestured to his laptop, then returned his attention to Vince.

As expected, Vince saw the potential for a new client and didn't hesitate to engage. "Not at all. What can I help you with?"

As the two men continued their conversation, Sky tuned out from the world, turning back to her notebook. She had no trouble ignoring people around her and could completely disengage when necessary. It was a skill she'd mastered at an early age. She was an only child and a bookworm like her mother. Her early love of reading had taught her how to make observations and write the details within the scene. She was then able to transport herself into the stories she both read and wrote. Everything around her faded away in the distance as she immersed herself into a book. She'd traveled the world, fallen in love, and experienced heartbreak, all in her imagination. Her reader base for the new pen name was a faithful one. Although she'd created the persona of Eden Skye, she found she liked being Eden. It freed her to write romance the way she felt it should be. Sky took her obligation to the readers seriously because they fell in love with the people and places in the worlds she created, just the same as she did.

"Sky, are you going to answer him?" Nudging her with his elbow, Vince interrupted her thoughts.

"Huh?" She looked between the two men. Confusion clouded her eyes as heat flushed her face. A prickling sensation raced up the back of her neck, the evidence of her embarrassment at having ignored them.

"Sorry. I wasn't paying attention. What was the question?"

"What kind of books do you write?" Again, the man's tone caught her attention, caressing her ears with much the same velvety effect as James Earl Jones, Alan Rickman, or Patrick Stewart. She loved voices, especially rich, deep ones. Skylar would eagerly listen to any of them read the daily newspaper and never lose interest.

She looked up at him, a smile filling her lips. "Romance. Contemporary romantic suspense, to be more specific."

"Ahhh. Romance." He exaggerated the phrase and bobbed his head, acknowledging her chosen writing genre with a crooked smile.

His expression wasn't lost on her, his was the response of many people when telling them she was a romance writer. She detected a hint of disapproval or condescension in his voice. Instantly, she felt the need to document his reaction with all the others she experienced for the exposé she had planned. Though he would never note the difference, her thinking morphed from romance writer to investigative reporter. It would only take a matter of minutes to tell if he was genuinely interested in her as a person or humoring her because he didn't take her work seriously. She took mental notes whenever the subject arose. What she'd discovered so far was that those on the outside of the romance genre dismissed love stories as nonsense. He would be shocked to know how many indie romance writers had healthy bank accounts.

She inclined her head as blood simmered in her veins. "Yes. Romance." The answer was defensive and clipped. It seemed she was always defending the choice to write love stories. She'd met people like him before. Judgmental. Quibbling about the content of romance novels. Everyone had an opinion. If the story was too sweet, it was judged as not realistic. Too erotic, and it was "mommy porn." She hadn't invented the chip on her shoulder; it was put there by the patronizing attitude of people who didn't even read the genre.

Really, what was the harm in escaping to love and passion within the pages of a book? She believed there was none at all and dismissed those with negative attitudes for something they knew nothing about.

Having been put in a position like this before, Sky stood her ground, trying hard not to be rude. It was more like digging deep, planting her feet in the statistics of how many romance books were sold each year. She prepared to state her position that, romance genre

or otherwise, a writer was a writer regardless of content. "It seems I'm a hopeless romantic and write stories that, as a whole, generate over one billion dollars in sales per year." A disdainful smile was all she could muster for this asshole. She couldn't help but feel a little smug defending her career decision with facts. "So, you see? There's quite a market for love stories."

His eyes never left hers. She'd said her piece and readied herself for what would come next. Would he be an arrogant dickhead, or would he open his mind to something that was a little outside his wheelhouse?

She studied him, the moments ticking away as she readied herself to defend her position and that of the romance writing community. What she hadn’t expected was the warmth she found in his gaze, and the longer they sat there, the more she found herself trying to resist the magnetism of the sweet, chocolate-colored pools.

About the Author

D.D. Lorenzo is an award-winning author who weaves emotions into the tapestry of her novels. A “Reader’s Choice” gold medal winner, she strives to pull at the heartstrings of her readers. You can find her enjoying the seashores of Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, and New Jersey.

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